



‘Once You Do Your Bit, What Happens Then?’

A Narrative Study of Parents’ Experiences of Reporting Bullying to Schools

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Tasmania
April, 2018

Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University of Tasmania or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis, nor does the thesis contain any material that infringes copyright.

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Statement of Ethical Conduct

The research associated with this thesis abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation, the guidelines by the Australian Government's Office of the Gene Technology Regulator and the rulings of the Safety, Ethics and Institutional Biosafety Committees of the University.

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Publications

The author acknowledges that a version of Chapter 3 was previously published as:

Herne, K. E. (2016). 'It's the parents': Re-presenting parents in school bullying research. *Critical Studies in Education*, 57(2), 254-270.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2014.988635>

Acknowledgements

This thesis has been a long time in the making and my heartfelt thanks go to the many people without whose assistance it would not have been completed.

Firstly, I am deeply grateful to the parents who took part in this research. The stories they shared with me so generously have taught me more than I could ever have imagined, not least about courage and persistence, and it is my sincere hope that in the pages that follow I have done justice to them.

I have been truly blessed in my supervisors, Dr Janet Dymont and Dr Mary Ann Hunter, who have been unwavering in their support for me and this research. I thank you both for the trust you have placed in me to follow my intuition in shaping this thesis and bringing my ideas to the fore. Whenever I have faltered you have met me with clear heads and kind hearts and gracefully smoothed a way forward, and for this I am especially grateful. I also wish to thank Dr Tony Dowden and Associate Professor Jeanne Allen who provided me with wise counsel and supervision before departing Tasmania for warmer climes, and Dr Scott Pederson who, as Graduate Research Coordinator, played a crucial role in supporting me to complete this thesis. My thanks also go to my fellow PhD candidate and office mate Deborah Brewer. Our discussions were always enriching and it has been a pleasure to share this experience with you.

I wish to acknowledge my erstwhile colleagues at the Centre for Rural Health at the University of Tasmania: Dr Clarissa Hughes, Dr Peter Orpin, Ms Kim Boyer and Dr Alexandra King. Without your belief in me I would never have had the confidence to embark on this journey and find my own voice as a researcher.

I am also grateful to the Australian Postgraduate Association and the University of Tasmania for the provision of financial assistance to conduct this research.

My sincere thanks go to my friends for the care they have shown me while I have been so preoccupied. I am especially thankful to Marion Thomas and Angela McGaffin, who have kept me sane with cups of tea and walks along the beach.

Finally, it is hard to know how to express the depth of my gratitude to my family who have supported and encouraged me every step of the way. While I have been writing, my two beautiful boys, Max and Griffin, have grown into kind and gentle young men and I could not be prouder of them. To my partner and best friend Michael, there could never be enough theatre reviews for me to proof-read to repay you for the many hours of patiently listening to me weld ideas and tinker with syntax, but from the bottom of my heart I thank you.

Abstract

School bullying is well recognised as a significant factor in adverse health, education and social outcomes for young people. Although parents are frequently represented as having an important role to play in the prevention of school bullying, very little research on the topic has been undertaken from the perspectives of parents themselves. Consequently, the experiences of parents who report incidents of bullying to schools are not well understood.

This study draws on narrative research methodologies to explore how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools. In particular, the study is underpinned by a ‘storied resource’ perspective which emphasises the shared cultural resources that people use to construct stories of personal experience. Further, the study is informed by dialogical approaches to research which seek understanding of the social world by engaging with, rather than reducing, complexity.

In-depth narrative interviews were conducted with 18 parents of children in Years 5-8 in Tasmania, Australia, about their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school. Analysis of the interviews took a layered approach to allow for deep engagement with the particularities of each parent’s story while also attending to connections and discontinuities across the stories as a whole. First, a re-telling of the stories through a series of vignettes focussed on key themes and events in each parent’s story. Next, Arthur Frank’s (1995) typology of illness narratives (restitution, chaos and quest), was used as a device to explore the shared cultural resources that parents drew on to narrate their experiences of

reporting bullying, and the implications this has for the types of agency they claimed for themselves as they did so.

This analysis revealed strong resonances between parents' personal stories of reporting bullying and the core narratives which Frank identifies as underlying most personal stories of illness. In such stories illness is commonly represented as a threat to the storyteller's sense of self. Similarly, in this study parents represented the bullying of their child as a threat not only to the safety and wellbeing of their child but also to their own moral identity as a parent. For these parents, the bullying their child experienced at school was seen as a significant threat to their capacity to carry out their most basic parental duty to protect their child from harm.

While previous research has emphasised the sense of powerlessness which is often felt by parents whose children have been bullied, in this study parents commonly represented themselves as active agents in bringing an end to the bullying of their child. Although some parents described how they had been able to achieve this by working collaboratively with their child's school, the majority described how they had struggled to have their reports of bullying taken seriously by the school. These parents feared that with no effective action from the school the bullying would continue unabated with potentially serious consequences for their child's future health and wellbeing. In addition, parents described how the lack of acknowledgement they received from the school served to undermine their confidence in themselves as a parent. However, only one parent told a story in which there was no respite from the sense of powerlessness evoked by this situation. For the most part, parents described how these fears and frustrations had acted as a catalyst for them to take further action to resolve the bullying,

including: taking a more assertive stance with the school, contacting authorities beyond the school, talking directly to the perpetrators of the bullying or to their parents and, in a number of instances, removing their child from the school.

In this way these parents' stories resonated most strongly with heroic aspects of the quest narrative as they described how they had had risen to the challenges posed by the bullying of their child. At the same time there was a great deal of complexity in how parents narrated these experiences. Each parent's account contained multiple storylines and shifting subject positions as they narrated different phases of their reporting experiences, and many of their stories traversed all three narrative types described by Frank. While the majority of parents who took part in this study told how they had taken primary responsibility for ensuring that the bullying of their child ceased there was also a strong impulse in their stories towards working more collaboratively with schools and other parents to respond to incidents of bullying.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to rich understandings of how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools. Further significance lies in its use of narrative research methodologies to highlight the capacity of stories to shape these experiences. By attending to the nuances in how parents narrate these experiences, and marking the moments when their stories shift from one narrative type to another, this study provides important insight into the complex ways in which parents are both constrained and enabled by broad cultural narratives about the roles and responsibilities of parents. It is argued that such understandings are crucial to the development of more collaborative relations between parents and schools with respect to bullying.

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Prologue

At the entrance to my son's school there is a brightly coloured sign with the school's name and logo on it. It's the spot where parents stop and heave a collective sigh of relief at morning drop off. That delicious moment when the morning mayhem of staggered breakfasts, lunchbox diplomacy, hastily signed permission slips, misplaced sports uniforms and forgotten musical instruments recedes, and there is a space before you turn and face the days' to-do list, whatever that may be.

We used to joke that there should be a cheer squad handing out cups of tea or coffee to every parent as their child entered the classroom. But for me, that moment brought a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach that only grew as the day went on and I wondered what the expression on my son's face would be when I came to pick him up at the end of the day. I could usually tell at a glance if his day had been OK or if something bad had happened again. On good days he would have lots to say about what they'd done in class or if there had been a particularly exciting game of handball at lunch time. On the other days I could see him doing his best to hold it together until we got to the car and then the tears would come. I never knew in the morning which kind of day it would be, but I did know that the bad ones were starting to come much more often.

Although I talked to my son's teacher about what was happening early on and I could see that she was trying to help, she couldn't seem to make much headway with the other children. In fact, it only seemed to make things worse.

It was hard to know how much of this to share with other parents as I tried to decide what to do. I worried that they might see it as a criticism of their own parenting and take offence. Or else, they might lecture me about what my son was doing to cause the other children to behave so cruelly towards him. But a few parents could see my distress and we got that cup of tea and talked. They told me their own stories and offered advice. One parent explained how she had been bullied herself as a child and all the lessons it had taught her about how to stay strong on life's journey. One talked sternly about how important it was to let the children work it out for themselves and reminded me that the teachers were all overworked and doing their best. Another told with pride how she had taken the Principal to task one day when she was unhappy about how a similar situation had been handled by the school and offered to support me to do the same. Yet another advised that, in her experience, once things had started to go bad for a child at a school, as she could see that they had for my son, the wisest course of action for the sake of their mental health was really to move them to another school.

I listened intently to all of these stories and tried to see if I could recognise myself in any of them. Could I just have a little more forbearance and wait and see how things turned out? Could I encourage my son to 'toughen up' a bit and maybe not take things so personally? Or teach him how to go 'under the radar' so as not to attract so much negative attention? Could I try harder to advocate with the school and report each and every incident as soon as it happened? Was I letting my son down by leaving him somewhere he was feeling so unsafe? What kind of a parent does that? What kind of a parent was I?

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study explores how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools. At the heart of the study are parents' personal stories of these experiences. It is fitting that this should be so not only because it is such stories which are largely absent from existing research on parents and school bullying (Harcourt, Jasperse, & Green, 2014; Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2011), but also because it was the process of sharing my story with other parents and listening to how they responded with stories of their own that provided the 'animating interest' (Frank, 2012) for this research. In exchanging stories of reporting bullying with other parents I was struck by the resonances I heard not only between our individual stories, but also between our collected stories and a broader stock of familiar stories and assumed knowledge about parenting and bullying. In particular, I was intrigued by the way in which this broader cultural knowledge seemed to lend moral force to parents' individual accounts of their experiences. Stories and their capacities are therefore integral to this research.

Further, notions of resonance have been a guiding principle throughout the research, especially in deciding how best to represent parents' stories in written form. As Conle (2000, p. 53) notes, in narrative research 'resonance is the process that carries the inquiry along, producing more and more stories, through metaphorical connections rather than strictly logical ones'. In line with this, a major concern in this study has been to attend to parents' stories about their experiences of reporting bullying in ways which allow the resonances at play

within and between them to be heard. In order to achieve this I have drawn on narrative methods of interpretation and analysis which resist processes of reduction and categorisation, and which allow parents' stories to 'breathe' (Frank, 2010).

Accordingly, the structure of the thesis is designed to work experientially, inviting the reader to listen for resonances between parents' personal stories of reporting bullying and broader cultural narratives about parents and school bullying, rather than explaining these connections in a purely didactic fashion. Through these means I invite the reader to enter into an ongoing dialogue with the personal and cultural stories presented here. As Frank (2005, p. 967) explains, the meaning of any story in the present depends on the stories it will generate in the future: 'One story calls forth another, both from the storyteller him or herself, and from the listener/recipient of the story. The point of any present story is its potential for revision and redistribution in future stories.'

It is my hope that the stories and analysis presented here will evoke further stories and discussion which deepen our capacity to listen and to hear the nuances in how parents are positioned, and position themselves, within the complex social and cultural environments in which school bullying, and reports of it, take place. In the remaining sections of this chapter I set out the rationale, aims and guiding questions for this research. I then briefly consider the significance of the research and provide an overview of the structure of the thesis.

Research Rationale, Aims and Questions

School bullying is well recognised as a significant problem in many countries around the world (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). In Australia, it is estimated

that as many as one in four students are bullied every few weeks or more (Cross et al., 2009). Studies have shown that children who are bullied are at risk of a range of adverse health, education and social outcomes including: school avoidance (Cross, Lester, & Barnes, 2015), poor academic performance (Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Mundy et al., 2017), the development of eating disorders (Striegel-Moore, Dohrm, Pike, Wilfey, & Fairburn, 2002), anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation (Holt et al., 2015; Silberg et al., 2016). In addition, research suggests that the harms associated with bullying can extend into adulthood (Östberg, Modin, & Låftman, 2017; Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014; Wolke, Copeland, Angold, & Costello, 2013).

In the past few decades, public concern and research activity to address the problem has led to the development of an array of school bullying prevention policies and programs (Evans, Fraser, & Cotter, 2014; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), many of which emphasise the importance of communication and collaboration between parents and schools. For example, in Australia, the National Safe Schools Framework identifies an important role for parents to work in partnership with schools to foster safe school environments (Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEEDYA], 2010). In addition, the national anti-bullying website Bullying No Way! recommends that parents notify schools if they are aware that their child is being bullied and states that: ‘Schools can be much more effective when parents report bullying and support their efforts to deal with it’ and further that ‘working together with the school is the best way to help your child resolve bullying issues’ (Safe and Supportive Schools Working Group, n.d.).

However, research indicates that such partnerships are proving elusive. A large scale study examining the implementation of the National Safe Schools Framework found little evidence of collaboration between parents and schools with respect to bullying (Cross, Epstein, et al., 2011). This is consistent with previous Australian findings that parental engagement is one of the most difficult elements of school bullying prevention programs to implement (Bernard & Milne, 2008; McGrath, 2007). In addition, a recent national survey exploring the prevalence and effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies in Australian government schools found that parents whose children had been bullied were often critical of the way in which schools responded to incidents of bullying, with less than a third of respondents believing that the school had been able to stop the bullying (Rigby & Johnson, 2016).

Although parents are widely acknowledged as an important element in the prevention of school bullying (e.g. Cross, Epstein, et al., 2011; Rigby, 2013; Robinson, 2013), very little research on the topic has been conducted from the perspectives of parents themselves (Axford et al., 2015; Harcourt et al., 2014; Sawyer et al., 2011). Much of the extant research relating to parents and school bullying has focussed on how parenting behaviours contribute to the risk of children becoming involved in bullying situations and what parents can do to guard against this (Herne, 2016). Consequently, relatively little is known about how parents make sense of their interactions with schools about incidents of bullying.

However, in recent years a small number of qualitative studies have investigated parents' experiences of reporting bullying to schools in countries such as Canada (Sawyer et al., 2011), the United States (Brown, Aalsma, & Ott,

2013), Denmark (Hein, 2014, 2016), New Zealand (Harcourt, Green, & Bowden, 2015) and the United Kingdom (Hale, Fox, & Murray, 2017). A common finding among these studies was that parents are often dissatisfied with the response they receive from schools to their reports of bullying and come away from these interactions feeling angry and powerless. Particular concerns for many of the parents who took part in these studies were the lack of acknowledgement they received from their child's school of the veracity of their reports of bullying and implied criticism by school staff of their performance as a parent. In addition, these studies identified a number of procedural failings in how schools respond to reports of bullying, including a lack of timely information provided to parents regarding the outcomes of their complaints and any resulting actions taken by the school.

In Australia, qualitative research on this topic has been extremely limited. In a small scale study, Humphrey and Crisp (2008) interviewed four parents of kindergarten children about their responses to bullying of their child and found that the parents experienced feelings of isolation and shame when their reports of bullying were dismissed by teaching staff. Further, participants in the study described feeling guilty that they had been unable to protect their child from being bullied and questioned the adequacy of their performance as a parent. As part of a broader study on the effects of bullying on family members, Ford (2013) interviewed 13 parents of children who had been bullied at school. This study found that relations between parents and teaching staff became adversarial when teachers suggested professional counselling for the child who was being bullied and parents interpreted this as a 'blame the victim' response to the problem. Further, these adversarial relations were seen to extend into the broader school

community and left parents of bullied children feeling stigmatised and lacking in support.

Overall, previous research on this topic has emphasised the sense of powerlessness which is often felt by parents as they attempt to engage with schools about incidents of bullying. However, with the exception of recent studies by Hein (2014, 2016) and Hale et al. (2017), research thus far has provided little analysis of how such experiences relate to the broader social and cultural contexts in which parents' reports of school bullying take place. In her research, Hein (2014, 2016) explored how Danish parents who reported bullying of their child to a school were positioned within broader systems of power and meaning whereby their actions were judged according to various parental stereotypes, such as 'over-protective parent'. According to Hein, such stereotypes function as part of a broader system of entangled discursive, institutional and political forces that limit parental agency in relation to school bullying. Recently, Hale et al. (2017) have also drawn attention to the role that shared cultural understandings about what it means to be a 'good parent' play in producing feelings of guilt and self-blame when parents find they are unable to protect their child from bullying at school.

From this perspective, productive dialogue between parents and schools with respect to bullying can be seen to be undermined by dominant discourses of parenting. In the present study I aim to build on these insights into the relationship between parents' negative experiences of reporting bullying to schools and broader social and cultural forces. However, it is important to note that, with the exception of one 'paradigm case' described by Brown et al. (2013), the experiences of parents who *have* been satisfied with the responses they

received from schools to their reports of bullying have not yet received detailed attention in the research literature. Although Hale et al. (2017) note that three parents who took part in their study spoke of positive experiences of reporting bullying to their child's school, their study does not describe these experiences in detail. In the present study, I aim to address this gap in the literature by including detailed analysis of parents' positive stories of reporting bullying as well as those which describe less satisfactory experiences.

Further, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, recent findings from the field of parenting culture studies suggest that power relations between parents and professionals can be highly fluid as parents reflexively engage with dominant discourses of parenting. In these studies, close analysis of how parents position themselves in relation to broad cultural understandings about the roles and responsibilities of parents reveal a dynamic process of identity construction through which parents claim moral agency for themselves in complex ways. As such, I suggest that an opportunity exists for additional qualitative research which seeks more nuanced understandings of how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools. The present study aims to contribute to such understandings by using narrative research methods to trace the complexities and ambiguities within and across parents' personal accounts of these experiences. In particular, the study explores resonances between parents' personal accounts of how they responded to the bullying of their child and broader cultural narratives about the roles and responsibilities of parents. Further, the study considers the implications these resonances have for the kinds of agency that parents claim for themselves as they recount their experiences. Accordingly, the questions which guide this study are:

1. How do parents whose children have been bullied at school narrate their experiences of reporting bullying to schools?
2. What broad cultural narratives do parents draw on to narrate their experiences of reporting bullying to schools?
3. What kinds of agency do parents claim for themselves as they narrate their experiences of reporting bullying to schools?

Significance of the Research

This study contributes new perspectives to school bullying research in a number of ways. Firstly, it adds an Australian perspective to a small but growing body of international qualitative research which explores parents' experiences of reporting bullying to schools (e.g. Brown et al., 2013; Hale et al., 2017; Harcourt et al., 2015; Hein, 2014, 2016). Secondly, while these studies focus on the negative aspects of such experiences, the present study encompasses a range of reporting experiences and provides detailed exploration of a number of examples of effective collaborations between parents and schools in response to incidents of bullying. Thirdly, the study provides insight into how parents' personal stories of reporting bullying relate to broader cultural understandings about the roles and responsibilities of parents. In this way the study aligns with an emerging body of school bullying research which shifts attention away from individual pathologies and causal factors in bullying towards detailed exploration of the complex social and cultural environments in which bullying is enacted (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014). Thus, the present study stands in contrast to much of the extant research on parents and school bullying which, as detailed in Chapter 3, proceeds from a

psychological perspective and focuses on how poor parenting behaviours contribute to the risk of children becoming involved in bullying situations.

Further significance of the study lies in its use of narrative research methodologies to deeply engage with the complexities in how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools. By attending to the tensions and ambiguities in how parents narrate these experiences this study provides insight into how parents are both constrained and enabled by broad cultural narratives about the roles and responsibilities of parents as they interact with schools about incidents of bullying. As Frank (2010) has argued, stories can be both good and bad companions; they can afford dignity and can also deny it. Thus, the stories we tell matter in shaping the world we wish to see. In accordance with this, a major concern in this study is to broaden the range of available stories about parents in relation to school bullying, and in doing so to open the way to more collaborative relations between parents and schools with respect to bullying.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis consists of nine chapters, each of which is briefly summarised below. Following this introductory chapter, two literature review chapters provide an overview of relevant research relating to contemporary parenting culture and parents and school bullying. These chapters are followed by a description of the methodological framework for the research, including its theoretical orientation, and the specific methods used to carry out the research. The next four chapters present interpretive accounts and narrative analysis of parents' personal stories of reporting bullying derived from interviews with 18

parents of children in Years 5-8 in Tasmania, Australia. One final chapter brings together insights from this interpretation and analysis of the interview data with discussion of theoretical arguments and implications for policy and practice.

Chapter 2: Contemporary Parenting Culture

In this chapter I outline key features of contemporary parenting culture as described in the research literature. In particular, I discuss three inter-related themes which are central to dominant discourses of parenting: parental responsibility, the management of risk and the perceived need for professional expertise to support parents in their role ‘as a parent’. Further, I consider how these shared cultural understandings about the roles and responsibilities of parents relate to broader sociocultural changes which have taken place in Western societies in the late modern age, such as the rise of neoliberalism and an increasing focus on the role of individuals in determining their future life chances. Although critics of contemporary parenting culture argue that these understandings serve to disempower parents, I show how an emerging body of research suggests that parents exercise a degree of creative agency as they reflexively engage with notions of what it means to be a ‘good parent’ in the late modern age.

Chapter 3: Parents in School Bullying Research

In this chapter I provide an overview of research which relates specifically to parents and school bullying. I show how much of the extant research on parents and school bullying is located within broad public narratives about parents in terms of responsibility and the management of risk. I argue that prevailing representations of parents in such terms are the product of dominant psychological conceptualisations of bullying as individual pathological behaviour which stems

from deficits in parenting. I contend that this provides a limited view of parents in relation to a complex social and cultural problem. I then discuss an emerging body of research which explores how parents are positioned within the social and cultural contexts in which bullying, and reports of bullying, take place. I argue that there is a need for further research in this vein which contributes to rich understandings of the ways in which parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter I describe the methodological framework for this study, including its narrative orientation and the specific methods used to conduct the research. Firstly, I explain how the study is underpinned by a ‘storied resource perspective’ (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) which emphasises the shared cultural resources that people use to construct stories of personal experience. Following this, I outline how the study draws on Arthur Frank’s (1995, 2013)¹ typology of illness narratives (restitution, chaos and quest), as a ‘listening device’ to explore the common storylines that parents use to narrate their experiences of reporting bullying; and further, to consider the implications these storylines have for the types of agency they claim for themselves as they do so. I then provide a detailed description of the methods used to carry out the research including: key ethical considerations, selection and recruitment of participants, design and conduct of narrative research interviews, transcription of the interviews and analysis and presentation of the data.

¹ A second edition of Arthur Frank’s *The Wounded Storyteller* was published in 2013. All further references are to this edition.

Chapter 5: Parents' Stories of Reporting Bullying

This chapter presents a series of vignettes which derive from interviews I conducted with 18 parents of children in Years 5-8 in Tasmania, Australia, about their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school. The vignettes are interpretive accounts of the stories parents told during the interviews, and are arranged in the order in which the interviews took place. The chapter is designed to provide something of the experience of listening to parents' stories one after another, and becoming attuned to the cultural resonances at play within and between them. In this way the chapter demonstrates a key assumption of the research which is that 'people's stories, however personal they are, depend on shared narrative resources' (Frank, 2010, p. 14). In addition, these vignettes act as a resource for further layers of analysis in the following chapters.

Chapters 6, 7 & 8: Restitution, Chaos and Quest.

In these three chapters I use Arthur Frank's typology of illness narratives to guide a detailed re-telling of a selection of parents' stories of reporting bullying. The typology provides a 'listening device' to explore the common storylines that parents draw on to narrate their experiences of reporting bullying to schools and the types of agency they claim for themselves as they do so. Of the 18 parents' stories included in the study, nine were selected for focussed attention in these chapters. Each narrative type is considered in a separate chapter which focusses on three stories which resonate strongly with that particular narrative type. A key concern in these chapters is to trace the complexities in how parents narrate these experiences and to mark the moments when their stories shift from one narrative type to another. In this way, these chapters provide insight into the dynamic

narrative processes by which parents enact their identity as a parent as they respond to bullying of their child at school.

Chapter 9: Discussion and Ways Forward

In the final chapter of the thesis I bring together insights from my interpretation and analysis of the interview data with discussion of key issues relating to contemporary parenting culture and school bullying as outlined in the literature review chapters. In particular, I consider how the common storylines which underlie parents' stories of reporting bullying relate to dominant discourses of individual responsibility, the management of risk and the perceived need for professional expertise in contemporary parenting culture. Further, I consider the implications that these shared narrative resources have for the types of agency parents claim as they recount their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school. Finally, I consider the study's implications for policy and practice and propose some areas for future research.

Chapter 2: Contemporary Parenting Culture

Introduction

As stated previously, the primary aim of this research is to contribute to understandings of how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools. A major concern in the research is to understand how parents' personal accounts of these experiences intersect with broad cultural narratives about the role of parents in responding to bullying. The next chapter provides a review of literature which relates specifically to parents and school bullying. In the present chapter I draw on literature which relates to contemporary parenting culture more broadly in order to locate the study in wider discussions about the roles and responsibilities of parents in contemporary Western societies. My purpose in this is to build an understanding of the discursive environments in which parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying. In particular, I consider the complex and often contradictory ways in which parents are positioned in public discourse. I begin with a brief overview of the key features of contemporary parenting culture as described in the literature. The remainder of the chapter is organised around three inter-related themes which emerge from the literature as central to current discourses of parenting: parental responsibility, the management of risk and the need for professional expertise.

Overview of Contemporary Parenting Culture

In the past few decades, 'parenting' and how best to perform the tasks associated with it, has become a frequent topic of discussion in the media as well as the focus of a publishing boom in practical advice manuals (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011; Hoffman, 2009; Lee, 2014a). Although the dispensation of

childcare advice is not a new phenomenon, in recent times the range of topics on which parents are advised has greatly expanded (Stearns, 2003). In contemporary Western societies parents may now choose from a vast array of advice covering each stage of their child's development, from establishing healthy feeding and sleeping patterns in babies, through managing toddler tantrums and challenging adolescent behaviours to helping school leavers choose a career path (e.g. Carr-Gregg, 2006; Green, 2006; Kelly, 2015; Lashlie, 2007; Sears & Sears, 2001). In recent years there has also been an increasing amount of information produced to help parents safeguard their children against a range of social ills, including involvement in bullying situations (e.g. DiMarco & Newman, 2011; Field, 2007; Lodge, 2014).

With so much, often conflicting, information available for parents in the public domain it is not surprising that many feel overwhelmed and anxious about making the right choices with regard to their children (Furedi, 2008; Pascoe, 2015; Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012; Stearns, 2003). Although the advice on offer represents a range of approaches to parenting, a common underlying assumption is that the specific practices parents choose in relation to their child will have a significant impact on the kind of person that child grows up to be and how they will fare in future life. As Furedi (2008, p. 61) observes, almost every parenting act is now 'analysed in minute detail, correlated with a negative or positive outcome, and endowed with far-reaching implications for child development'. Indeed, over the past few decades the word 'parenting' has come to be understood in terms of what parents *do*, as can be seen in an increasing use of the word 'parent' as a verb rather than a noun (Gillies, 2011; Hoffman, 2009; Smith, 2010). As Hoffman (2009, p. 27) notes, this shift in language usage highlights

‘the role of parents as agents who actively produce the child, overshadowing parenthood as a state of *being in relationship* to a child’.

Numerous researchers have drawn connections between such a view of parents as producers of children and neoliberal forms of governance in which responsibility for social outcomes is devolved from the state to the individual (e.g., Baez & Talburt, 2008; De Benedictis, 2012; Hoffman, 2010; Lee, Macvarish, & Bristow, 2010; Lupton, 2012a; Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012; Wall, 2004). From this perspective, parents are held to be responsible for achieving desirable health, education and social outcomes for their children. Furedi describes this mode of thinking as ‘an ideology of parental determinism’ and argues that it underpins much recent public policy in which ‘it is accepted that parenting failures are the cause of many of society’s problems’ (Furedi, 2012, p. 1). In his much cited critique of contemporary parenting culture, *Paranoid Parenting* (2008), Furedi argues that ‘by assuming that so much is at stake’ the ideology of parental determinism functions to legitimize a ‘highly interventionist adult role in childhood’ (p. 54). Further, he argues that widespread acceptance of these ideas in the public domain has given rise to a culture of anxiety in which parents feel compelled to exercise constant vigilance over their children.

Similarly, in *The Claims of Parenting* (2012), Ramaekers and Suissa highlight the powerful effects that public discourse can have on how parents come to understand themselves in their role ‘as a parent’. As they explain, ‘the claims that are made *about* and *on* parents can eventually become claims that are made by parents themselves, as parents come gradually to see themselves in the ways implied in the predominant languages of parenting’ (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012, p. vii). Through an analysis of recent policy and popular advice literature, these

authors show how current public discourse about parents is informed by scientific and instrumental accounts of the parent-child relationship. In particular, they show how such discourse draws on concepts which derive from developmental psychology and identify a crucial role for parents in children's cognitive and emotional development. Further, they argue that childrearing is commonly conceptualised as a 'job' or a 'task' requiring particular knowledge and skills. The corollary to this is that parents are seen as being 'in need of education' if they are to fulfil their role as a parent and achieve optimal outcomes for their child (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012, p. 23).

In line with Furedi (2008), Ramaekers and Suissa (2012, p. xiii) argue that the causal logic implied in current discourses of parenting has become so pervasive that it is difficult to see it as anything other than natural; 'so natural, in fact, that we seem to hardly even notice it anymore'. However, a growing body of research has begun to critically examine such discourse to show how it is located within broader sociocultural changes which have taken place in Western societies over the past half-century. As noted above, researchers have highlighted the connection between current conceptualisations of 'parenting' as a goal-oriented activity and the rise of neoliberal approaches to social policy which focus on individual responsibility for achieving a range of desirable outcomes.

Researchers have also noted close links between an increasing focus on notions of parental responsibility and theories of 'individualization' in the late modern age (e.g. De Benedictis, 2012; Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Gillies, 2005; Gillies, 2011; Harden, 2005; Kehily, 2010; Lupton, 2012a). According to theorists such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), the late modern age is characterised by the decreasing influence of collective structures such as the

family and social class in people's lives and greater freedom for individuals to choose their life's trajectory. However, it is argued that with greater freedom of choice comes greater responsibility as individuals can no longer rely on traditional ways of being but must become active agents in creating their own biographies.

As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. 3) put it:

One was born into traditional society and its preconditions (such as social estate and religion). For modern social advantages one has to do something, to make an active effort. One has to win, know how to assert oneself in the competition for limited resources – and not only once but day after day. Thus the normal biography becomes the 'elective biography', 'the reflexive biography, the 'do-it-yourself biography'.

Further, it is argued that the constant requirement to position oneself for advantage in rapidly changing times carries with it a strong sense of risk, as individuals must also bear the consequences of their life choices, successes and failures alike. Thus, 'the do-it- yourself biography is always a 'risk biography', indeed a 'tightrope biography, a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3).

Although theories of individualization have been subject to much scholarly critique, particularly in relation to claims of the decreasing significance of social class (for a review of this literature see Dawson, 2012), over the past few decades these ideas have gained prominence in public discourse in relation to a range of topics which have major import for parents (Gillies, 2005; Mainland, Shaw, & Prier, 2017). Thus, notions of responsibility and risk are integral to broad cultural understandings of the role of parents in contemporary Western societies. Further, in this context significant value is placed on the role of

professional expertise in assisting parents to negotiate a myriad of potential risks and ensure optimal outcomes for their child (Furedi, 2008; Lee, 2014a). In the remainder of this chapter I explore in some further detail ways in which these ideas inform how contemporary parents understand themselves in their role as parents.

Responsibility

A key feature of contemporary parenting culture is the assumption that parents are responsible for ensuring a range of desirable health, education and social outcomes for their children. Indeed, such claims are often presented in the media and by policy makers and parents alike as self-evident truth (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012; Shuffelton, 2013). However, historical studies show that beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of parenthood have changed over time in conjunction with changing perceptions of the nature and meaning of childhood (Cunningham, 2005; Stearns, 2003; Zelizer, 1985). For example, Zelizer (1985) argues that in the United States the removal of children from the labour market between the 1870s and 1930s contributed to major changes in how children were viewed within the family. In contrast to the economic value children had previously held as working members of the family, during the 20th century children were increasingly seen in terms of the emotional value they held for their parents. These changes had significant implications for the ways in which parents cared for their children, with greater focus placed on what parents could do to ensure that their now ‘economically useless but emotionally priceless’ children thrived (Zelizer, 1985, p. 209).

In addition, smaller family sizes in the 20th century meant that parents had more time and resources to devote to the care of individual children (Cunningham, 2005; Stearns, 2003). According to Furedi (2008), the decline of large, intergenerational households represents a key turning point in the history of parenting, with mothers and fathers expected to assume increasing responsibility for the care of children:

This view of parenting is closely linked to the decline of large households and the rise of more individualized nuclear family arrangements. Once children are seen as the responsibility of a mother and father rather than of a larger community, the modern view of parenting acquires salience (p. 102)

Jenkins (2006) also identifies the decline of extended family support for childcare as a major factor which has shaped current perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of parents. Drawing on a famous study of family and kinship in East London in the 1950s (Young & Wilmott, 1962), Jenkins observes that in this period parenting was understood as a ‘collectively shared enterprise’ with the work often ‘distributed across a wide range of extended family and community members’ (p. 383). In this context, decisions about how to care for children were guided by ‘collectively agreed approaches and practices’ (p. 384). By contrast, contemporary parents are charged not only with the responsibility of physically carrying out the tasks of childcare, but also of determining the best ways to do so without the guidance of such shared understandings. According to Jenkins, one effect of the loss of these familial networks of support has been an ‘increase in feelings of uncertainty regarding how to be an effective parent’ (p. 384).

Intensive parenting

Over the past few decades these changes have also been compounded by the growing range of activities for which parents are expected to take responsibility (Faircloth, 2014; Furedi, 2008; Hays, 1996). In recent years researchers have used the term ‘intensive parenting’ to denote a highly demanding approach to childrearing in which the needs of the child are seen to be paramount (e.g Craig, Powell, & Smyth, 2014; Espino, 2013; Faircloth, 2014; Lupton, 2012a; Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013; Shirani et al., 2012; Wall, 2010). Although the gender neutral term ‘intensive parenting’ is commonly used in the research literature, most studies relating to this style of parenting have focussed on mothers, with fathers only recently garnering research attention (Craig et al., 2014; Shirani et al., 2012). Sociologist Sharon Hays first coined the term ‘intensive mothering’ in her book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996). According to Hays, ideas about the importance of intensive contact between mothers and young children have contributed to an ‘ideology of intensive mothering’ which is ‘child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive and financially expensive’ (Hays, 1996, p. 8).

As Wall (2010) explains, arguments for intensive parenting practices have been strongly influenced by findings from developmental psychology, and in particular attachment theory. Based on studies of the effects of maternal deprivation (Bowlby, 1969), and patterns of attachment between an infant and their primary caregiver (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), attachment theory posits that children who are deprived of secure attachment with a primary caregiver in their early years are at risk of a range of psychological and behavioural difficulties across their life course. Since the 1990s research findings

from neurological research have also been used to support claims about the importance of primary caregivers ‘spending ample, one-on-one quality time with children in order to stimulate brain development and future brain potential’ (Wall, 2010, p. 254).

A key concern in critiques of intensive parenting culture is the negative impact that such expectations have on mothers’ mental health (Liss, Schiffrin, & Rizzo, 2013; Rizzo et al., 2013; Wall, 2010; Warner, 2006). These studies indicate that many mothers feel a sense of guilt or shame when they are unable to meet the expectations associated with intensive parenting culture. For example, Wall (2010) interviewed a group of Canadian mothers about their experiences with intensive parenting advice and found that many of the mothers felt guilty that they were not able to do as much as they thought they should for their children. Wall notes that one of the most striking findings of this study is the extent to which participants unquestioningly accepted that mothers could control their children’s outcomes and were responsible for doing so. However, she argues that this sense of responsibility potentially sets mothers up for failure and results in ‘increased stress, anxiety, guilt and exhaustion’ (Wall, 2010, p. 262).

Further, findings from a recent survey of mothers in the United States suggest that the pressures associated with intensive parenting culture are widespread, affecting even those mothers who do not subscribe to this approach to parenting (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2016). In this study, mothers were surveyed about their beliefs about their role as a mother and the pressures they encounter in the role. The study found that whether or not participants supported ideas of intensive parenting, they felt pressured to be ‘perfect’ in their role as a mother and a sense of guilt about not living up to expected standards of parenting.

The authors suggest that these findings are indicative of the hegemonic power of current discourses of intensive mothering, such that ‘the existence of the pressure to be a perfect mother seems to be infiltrating the ways in which women view themselves’ (Henderson et al., 2016, p. 522).

As noted previously, very little research has focussed on how fathers respond to the demands of intensive parenting culture. However, a recent analysis of time spent by Australian mothers and fathers with their children suggests that fathers may also be participating in a trend towards more intensive child-centred parenting (Craig et al., 2014). Based on an analysis of data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Time Use Surveys for the years 1992 and 2006, the study found that although mothers continued to be the primary carers of children, during this period fathers took on an increased range of responsibilities in relation to childcare, including hands-on routine care. The authors posit that these changes may be influenced by ‘discourses on the active, engaged father’ and further that they provide support for ‘the notion that fathers are an integral part of the trend towards intensive parenting’ (Craig et al., 2014, p. 569-70).

Parents as partners

One area of parental responsibility which has particular relevance to the present study is involvement with children’s schooling. Throughout much of the 20th century there was little expectation that parents would actively engage with their child’s school or undertake activities at home to support their child’s formal learning (Proctor, 2010; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). Indeed, as Vincent and Tomlinson (1997, p. 363) note, ‘in the immediate post-war period, parents were largely kept at a distance from schools and the process of schooling’. However,

from the 1970s onwards parents began to be encouraged to take a more active role in their children's education (Dimmock, O'Donoghue, & Robb, 1996).

Over the past few decades a significant amount of research activity has been directed towards improving parental engagement with schools (Dimmock et al., 1996; Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Epstein et al., 2009; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hornby, 2011; Povey et al., 2016). In Australia, parental engagement is currently included as a key factor in government policies which aim to improve children's educational outcomes. For example, parental engagement is included as one of four pillars of the federal government's current schools reform agenda, entitled Students First. The other three pillars are: teacher quality, school autonomy and strengthening the curriculum. According to the Students First website, parent engagement covers a broad range of activities across home and school environments:

Effective parent and family engagement in education is more than just participation in school meetings and helping with fundraising, it is actively engaging with your child's learning, both at home and at school. When schools and families work together, children do better and stay in school longer (Department of Education and Training, 2016).

From this perspective, parents are seen to have a clear responsibility to work in partnership with schools to improve children's educational outcomes. However, an extensive body of research has shown that relations between parents and schools are often fraught with tensions about the nature and extent of parental responsibility within such partnerships (e.g. Armstrong, 1995; Bastiani, 1993; Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Crozier, 1998, 2000; De Carvalho, 2001; Vincent, 1996; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). As Vincent and Tomlinson (1997, p. 366)

point out, although the term ‘partnership’ is suggestive of a relationship between equals, the rhetoric of partnership ‘fails to recognise the way in which teachers have, by virtue of their location within an institution and their professional knowledge, a built in command over the relationship’. Further, they argue that efforts to promote collaboration between home and school, such as home-school contracts, serve to ‘enforce particular forms of parental behaviour’ and thus can be seen as ‘part of a discursive ensemble to promote “good” parenting practices, and to emphasise complete parental responsibility for children's behaviour and achievement’ (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997, p. 373).

As Nakagawa (2000, p. 448) observes ‘the discourse surrounding parental involvement sends a variety of messages’ in which parents are represented as both ‘protectors’ and ‘problems’ in relation to their children’s education. Through an analysis of educational policy and school documents in the United States, Nakagawa shows how parents are seen as an important resource for schools in meeting their educational goals, but are also blamed when schools fail to meet these goals. Nakagawa (2000, p. 456) argues that this places parents in a ‘double-bind’, making it hard for them to know how to best help their children in relation to school:

Parents are told that they are a valuable tool but are also told that they are the cause of why schools are not doing better. Parents can turn the schools around, but first they must take time off work and learn what they are supposed to do. In either case, parents must act in ways validated by the school system, or their participation is not recognized or may be resented. The good parent is constructed as one who takes the lead of the school, who is involved but not too involved, and who supports but does not challenge.

More recently, studies have shown that tensions about the exact nature of the role of parents in relation to children's schooling are ongoing (Bæck, 2010; Barr et al., 2012; Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Freeman, 2010; Luet, 2017; Macfarlane, 2008, 2009; Tveit, 2009). For example, Macfarlane (2008) discusses the experience of a group of parents in Queensland, Australia, who attempted to lobby the State education authority for additional teacher aide time in prep classes. Although these parents felt that they were 'doing their job' by advocating for more resources for their school, the response from education authorities indicated that the parents had 'crossed the line' by attempting to intervene in decisions about curriculum and staffing issues. As Macfarlane notes, it is not difficult to see how such conflicts might arise when policy directives invite parents to engage with schools, yet also place limits on the types of activities which are seen to be appropriate to the parent role. According to Macfarlane (2008, p. 705), the rhetoric of parent-school partnerships assigns parents a role that is 'active and engaged' but does not extend to positions of leadership or expert opinion. Parents who step outside the confines of this role risk being seen as a problem to be managed by the school rather than a 'properly engaged' member of the school community.

Parents as consumers

At the same time, parents are constructed as 'consumers' or 'clients' as schools compete for students in increasingly market driven systems of education (Angus, 2015; Windle, 2009). As Cucchiara and Horvat (2014, p. 491) observe, 'because consumption is intertwined with how people think about themselves and their lives and the identities they wish to project, the choices they make take on enormous significance'. Research indicates that many Australian parents see the

choice of where they will send their child to school as one of the most important decisions they will make on behalf of their child and it is often the source of a great deal of anxiety (Aitchison, 2010; Beamish & Morey, 2012; Campbell, Proctor, & Sherington, 2009; Proctor & Aitchison, 2015). This is a relatively recent phenomenon as for much of the 20th century the majority of Australian parents sent their children to their local government or Catholic school as a matter of course, with only the wealthy able to choose high fee paying private schools (Campbell et al., 2009). However, in the past few decades, education reforms at state and federal levels have led to the production of highly differentiated education markets in which parents are encouraged to act as informed consumers and choose the best available school for their child.

These changes can be seen as part of a neoliberal reform agenda in which individuals are expected to take greater responsibility for maximising their future life chances (Angus, 2015). In addition, ‘policies of choice’ are intended as a means of improving accountability and quality control in schools (Campbell, 2005; Campbell et al., 2009; Connell, 2013; Proctor & Aitchison, 2015). As Proctor and Aitchison (2015, p. 325) explain:

The public vigilance of parents acting as individuals, yet coordinated by the market mechanism, is meant to be a key driver of quality control. Under-performing schools, it is argued, will be forced to make improvements in order to attract parents. Well-managed schools will be validated in the marketplace.

From this perspective, parents are understood to be powerful agents in securing long-term benefits for their children through the choices they make about their education. However, critics have argued that rather than opening up better educational opportunities to more students, market driven approaches to education

only exacerbate inequities, as they increase ‘sorting of students between schools based on their socio-economic status, their ethnicity and their ability, and quality can become increasingly unequal between schools’ (Musset, 2012, p. 4). Connell (2013, p. 106) argues that this process of sorting and the resulting ‘jockeying for position in competitive markets’ undermines respect and trust in educational relationships. Further, Connell suggests that the pressure for schools to act as competitive businesses with systems of ‘accountability’ has created particular tensions for teachers, who are increasingly expected to demonstrate their professionalism against short-term performance measures such as results in high stakes testing regimes. According to Connell, such measures only serve to undermine teachers’ professionalism as they struggle to balance short-term goals with the broader needs of their students.

Notions of accountability within consumer models of education also have significant implications for relations between parents and schools, most particularly when parents are dissatisfied with the ‘service’ provided. In this context parents are ‘charged with an advocacy role’ (Inglis, 2012, p. 95) which often involves questioning specific educational practices adopted by the school. However, as discussed previously, there is a fine line between parents being seen to be ‘properly engaged’ in their child’s education and being seen as a ‘problem’ if they become too demanding or express views contrary to those of school staff. Studies have shown that relations between parents and schools can become strained when parents adopt an advocacy role, especially if teachers perceive that their professional judgement is being undermined (Hornby, 2011; Inglis, 2012; Landeros, 2010; Moore, 1994).

‘Storming’ parents

In recent years there has also been growing concern about parents who express their dissatisfaction with schools through angry or aggressive behaviours (e.g. Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2016; Paine, 2015). A recent national survey of Australian school principals found that more than one third of respondents had experienced bullying in the previous year, with parents being amongst the worst offenders (Riley, 2015). Education authorities have responded to concerns about the increasing incidence of such behaviour with a range of measures to help schools manage the behaviour of parents and provide a safe working environment for staff. For example, recent changes to the Tasmanian Education Act provide for the development of adult behaviour policies in schools and the introduction of penalties for adults who behave in unacceptable ways towards staff or students (Department of Education Tasmania, 2017).

In an analysis of different types of communications between parents and schools, Vincent and Martin (2002, p. 114) refer to expressions of anger or direct protest by parents as ‘storming’. In this study they conducted interviews with parents at two secondary schools in the United Kingdom about the various strategies they used to raise concerns with their child’s school and the types of responses they received. The study found that instances of ‘storming’ were rare, with parents often choosing to remain silent about their concerns. For some parents the decision to remain silent was influenced by concerns about being seen as a ‘pushy parent’ while others took a ‘wait and see’ approach to problems at school. When instances of ‘storming’ did occur, they were overwhelmingly prompted by concerns about a child’s welfare, such as involvement in bullying, rather than their academic progress or other administrative matters. The authors

suggest that parents may be less restrained in their communications with schools about children's welfare because such issues 'engage the parent's primary role as a carer' (Vincent & Martin, 2002, p. 120).

In a further article which draws on this research, Ranson, Martin, and Vincent (2004) provide a detailed analysis of these instances of 'storming' by parents. They argue that through their expression of anger these parents sought not only to advocate for their child but also to 'recover their sense of responsibility and self-respect' as a parent (p. 272). The authors found that instances of 'storming' were often prompted by events where parents felt that the school was failing in its responsibility in *loco parentis*, thereby posing a threat to their own 'sense of responsibility for their children and need to feel secure about their wellbeing' (p. 266). Feelings of frustration and anger were also exacerbated if parents perceived that their capability as a parent was being called into question by the school. Instances of 'storming' often occurred after parents had exercised patience for some time before confronting the school about a particular grievance: 'But then an event causes exasperation and patience to evaporate. Indignant parents demand attention: marching in to school, or telephoning and insisting on an immediate meeting' (p. 269). Despite the highly charged nature of these interactions, the authors argue that the orientation of the parents was towards reaching shared understanding and a resolution to the problem:

The parents were demanding immediate redress yet the language codes of their narratives communicated a realization of the need for problem-solving that required investigation, conversation and thus accurate knowledge for appropriate decision making. Thus the parents, while transgressing civic norms in expressing

anger, were also, in their 'performing attitude' communicating the need for deliberation, reasonableness and co-operative action (Ranson et al., 2004, p. 270).

However, Ranson et al. (2004) argue that this underlying orientation towards collaborative problem-solving was not often reciprocated in the responses parents received from schools, which commonly served to reinforce the professional authority of the school and position parents as 'subordinate clients' (p. 273). By drawing attention to the multiple layers of meaning in these interactions, Ranson et al. (2004) provide important insight into the complex social and cultural environments which parents must negotiate as they advocate with schools on behalf of their child. As I discuss in the following section, acknowledgement of this complexity is particularly important in the context of current conceptualisations of parenting which emphasise the role of parents in managing a wide range of risks to children's health and safety.

Risk

As noted previously, social theorists have argued that late modernity is characterised by a sense of risk and uncertainty as individuals are seen to be responsible for determining their future circumstances through the choices they make (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). From this perspective social problems are regarded as the result of poor choices by individuals. For parents, this way of thinking brings a heightened sense of risk, as the choices they make on behalf of their children are imbued with significance not only for their children's future but also for their sense of themselves as a 'good parent' (Furedi, 2008; Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012).

Further, in contemporary Western societies the notion of risk is primarily understood in negative terms as possible danger or outcomes to be avoided (Lee, 2014b; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). As Lee (2014b, p. 11) explains, in the past the notion of risk was associated with the calculation of probable outcomes, which could be positive or negative, whereas in more recent times it has come to be associated with ‘a way of thinking about the future in which *possibilities that are untoward* are taken into account more than *probabilities*’. In Beck’s view, such a focus on risk avoidance has implications for the quality of community and the types of values shared by society. He argues that in the transition from class to risk society the broad goal of equality has been replaced by concerns about safety and further, that society is now bound by a ‘commonality of anxiety’ rather than one of need:

The place of the value system of the ‘unequal society’ is taken by the value system of the ‘unsafe society’. Whereas the utopia of equality contains a wealth of substantial and positive goals of social change, the utopia of the risk society remains peculiarly negative and defensive (Beck, 1992, p. 49).

Parents as risk managers

In line with Beck’s description of the risk society, numerous authors have called attention to a pervasive sense of anxiety in contemporary parenting culture (Bristow, 2014a; Espino, 2013; Faircloth, 2014; Furedi, 2008; Guldberg, 2009; Kehily, 2010; Nelson, 2010; Skenazy, 2009; Stearns, 2003; Warner, 2006). Furedi (2008) argues that contemporary parents are guided in their approach to childrearing by the perception that the modern world poses an increasing number of threats to children’s health and safety. He states that ‘since the 1980s the belief that youngsters are inherently vulnerable and “at risk” has acquired the character

of a cultural dogma' (Furedi, 2008, p. 42). Further, Kehily (2010) argues that public discourse about the dangers posed by new technologies, the rising influence of consumerism and pressure associated with high stakes educational testing, contributes to a perception that childhood itself is undergoing a 'crisis'. As a prime example of such discourse, Kehily (2010, p. 173) cites Sue Palmer's book, *Toxic Childhood* (2006), in which it is argued that the modern world produces a 'toxic cocktail' of damaging influences which threaten to contaminate the experience of childhood. From this perspective, parents are seen to have a crucial role in preserving a particular type of childhood which, it is argued, is more in tune with children's developmental needs. Indeed, in the sequel to this book, *Detoxing Childhood* (2007), Palmer provides detailed guidance for parents on how they can fulfil this role by carefully monitoring the types of influences their children are exposed to.

In addition to shielding children from the damaging effects of modern society, contemporary parents are seen to have a responsibility to protect their children from a range of accidents which were previously accepted as part and parcel of childhood (Furedi, 2008; Stearns, 2003). As Stearns observes, in the 19th century accidents in childhood were regarded as unfortunate but largely unavoidable. However, during the 20th century ideas of risk and accident were redefined 'in favour of a nearly explicit position that accidents were not really accidental – they flowed from parental fault' (Stearns, 2003, p. 37). Thus, new perceptions of risk as something which can be controlled were accompanied by the assumption that parents can, and should, control their children's environment in order to ensure their health and safety. Along with Stearns (2003), a number of authors have argued that these ideas contribute to high levels of anxiety amongst

parents who feel that they must be constantly on the alert for anything that could possibly go wrong (e.g. Furedi, 2008; Guldberg, 2009; Skenazy, 2009).

However, research shows that the way in which parents respond to risk in everyday life is somewhat more complex as they attempt to negotiate differing cultural viewpoints on the place of risk in children's lives (Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Little, 2015; Niehues, Bundy, Broom, & Tranter, 2015; Niehues et al., 2013). For example, Jenkins (2006) interviewed parents whose children had sustained injuries while participating in 'risky' activities such as skateboarding or horse riding, and found that the parents struggled with competing sets of social expectations about the degree to which they should attempt to protect their child from such injuries. While participants in the study spoke of their strong desire to keep their child safe, they also made frequent reference to warnings against 'wrapping children up in cotton wool'. Jenkins suggests that such warnings harken back to a previous generation of parents which was more accepting of the 'inevitability of adversity and the need for children to learn through their exposure to it' (p. 385). He describes how parents attempted to balance these differing approaches to risk by allowing their child to engage in 'risky' activities whilst also putting in place strategies to reduce the risk of accidents and to respond when they did occur.

In a recent Australian study, Little (2015) also found tensions between mothers' acknowledgement of the benefits of risk taking in outdoor play and their desire to protect their children from harm. In this study, mothers of four and five year old children were asked about their beliefs and current practices regarding their children's risk taking in outdoor play, as well as their own experiences of such play during childhood. Although the majority of participants acknowledged

the valuable learning opportunities for children in independent outdoor play, and reflected positively on their own experiences of playing unsupervised outdoors as a child, they also indicated they would not allow their children the same freedom that they had experienced, even when they were a little older and better able to negotiate risks for themselves. Amongst the reasons given for this greater degree of caution were concerns about ‘stranger danger’ and the fear that their child may be abused or abducted. The knowledge that this was statistically unlikely did little to allay these fears, which the author notes were significantly influenced by reports in the media. In addition, some participants described how they were influenced in their decision making by concerns that ‘their parenting skills would be called into question’ by other parents if they allowed their child to take risks while playing. Consequently these parents ‘placed greater restrictions on their children than they might otherwise’ (Little, 2015, p. 34).

Similarly, Niehues et al. (2015, p. 818) found that parents who exercised a high degree of control over their children’s activities were strongly influenced by concerns about being seen as a ‘good parent’ and ‘worried when they believed that their parenting skills were being questioned’. However, a second group of parents who had experienced a greater degree of adversity in their own lives had a more positive view of risk and saw it as an opportunity for their children to learn to overcome their fears and cope with adversity. The authors suggest that by allowing their children to engage in risky activities this group of parents chose to ‘acknowledge life’s uncertainties’ and to ‘share control with their children and other adults’ (Niehues et al., 2015, pp. 817-818). In contrast to representations of contemporary parenting culture as a monolithic force which allows parents little choice in how they respond to risk, these studies highlight the complex range of

social and cultural influences that parents negotiate on a daily basis as they make decisions about how they will care for their child. As Jenkins (2006, p. 387) states: ‘Parents are not the passive recipients of cultural messages but interact and negotiate with a plurality of risk orientations every time their child exits the front door.’

The ‘double bind’ of parenting culture

These studies also illustrate what Bristow (2014a) has termed ‘the double bind of parenting culture’ in which parents experience conflict between the sense of responsibility encouraged by intensive parenting culture and warnings against over-protective parenting, often conveyed through the use of pejorative terms such as ‘cotton wool kids’ and ‘helicopter parents’. In recent years problems associated with over-protective parenting have become a frequent topic of discussion in the media and on parenting websites (e.g. Fontaine, 2015; Gopal, 2016; Joyce, 2014; Loh, 2016). In addition, popular advice manuals provide strong warnings for parents against intervening each time their child encounters a problem (e.g. Glass & Tabatsky, 2014; Guldberg, 2009; Lahey, 2015; Lythcott-Haims, 2015; Skenazy, 2009). These authors argue that the extreme risk aversion which characterises intensive parenting culture is itself a risk to children’s healthy development because it does not allow them the freedom to learn how to solve problems for themselves and cope with adversity. However, as Bristow (2014a, pp. 201-202) points out, such critiques are also informed by ‘central tenets of intensive parenting culture, which presume that what parents do (or don’t do) is a central and determining importance’.

One area in which the double bind of parenting culture is increasingly evident, and which has particular salience for the present study, is that of

children's mental health. As Stearns (2003, pp. 21-22) outlines, during the 20th century a view of children as emotionally fragile and 'vulnerable to psychological demons' gradually replaced one of children as naturally resilient and possessing an inner core of 'sturdiness' which, with a small amount of adult guidance, would see them through most difficulties. This new perception of childhood as a time fraught with potentially damaging fears and insecurities was accompanied by a significant increase in parental obligation to help children manage their emotions: 'Childhood self-sufficiency had been redefined away' and 'parental vigilance was required' (Stearns, 2003. p. 25). According to Stearns these changes represent 'a cultural shift of major proportions' which has continued into the new millennium (p. 39). In line with this, Furedi (2008, p. 45) claims that 'the emotionally damaged child has become the symbol of contemporary childhood'. Further, in the past few decades the perceived need for vigilance in relation to children's mental health has acquired a greater sense of urgency as reports of youth suicides and school shootings, such as that which occurred in 1999 at Columbine High School in the United States, prompt widespread discussions about the relative responsibilities of parents and schools in preventing such tragedies (Hong, Cho, Allen-Meares, & Espelage, 2011; Muschert & Peguero, 2010).

In Australia, as elsewhere in the Western world, concerns about children's mental health are high on the public agenda. In 2014, suicide was the leading cause of death amongst young Australians aged between 5 and 17 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016c). The Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing conducted in 2014 found that almost one in seven (13.9%) 4-17 year olds had experienced a mental disorder in the previous 12 months (Lawrence et al., 2015, p. 4). With regard to prevention efforts,

parents are seen to have a crucial role to play in monitoring their children for early signs of emotional or psychological distress. For example, KidsMatter, an Australian mental health initiative delivered through primary schools and early childhood centres, identifies families as the ‘first and biggest influence on children’s mental health’ and includes a range of resources to assist parents to ‘support children’s mental health and wellbeing, and to recognise if and when professional help is needed’ (KidsMatter, 2016).

However, for many parents, seeking help on behalf of a child who is experiencing a mental illness can be overlaid with concerns about their performance as a parent. Studies have shown that parents whose children experience mental illness often blame themselves for the illness, perceiving that some fault or oversight in their parenting has contributed to its onset (Eaton, Ohan, Stritzke, & Corrigan, 2016; Ferriter & Huband, 2003; Francis, 2012; Harden, 2005; Hughes et al., 2017; Moses, 2010). Moses (2010, p. 104) argues that mothers are particularly susceptible to feelings of self-blame regarding their child’s mental illness and suggests that this ‘can easily be tied to culturally dominant narratives about the requirements for being a “good mother”, namely, patience, selfless devotion and readiness to always protect and fight for their child’. In addition to blaming themselves for contributing to the cause of their child’s illness, Moses found that some parents also blamed themselves for failing to advocate effectively on behalf of their child with service providers and schools. Further, she describes the strong sense of inadequacy these mothers felt when they failed to meet the ‘internal standards of valour’ which some mothers hold themselves to (Moses, 2010, p. 109).

Eaton et al. (2016) also found that parents of children with emotional and/or behavioural disorders measured themselves against a 'good parent' ideal. All of the mothers interviewed for their study 'placed a strong emphasis on being and or/ being recognised as a good parent' which they described as 'one who protected, nurtured and provided for the child' (p. 3114). However, all of the mothers who took part in the study also reported that they had, at some time, felt blamed by others 'for creating, exacerbating or not doing enough to remedy their child's disorder' (p. 3115). This contributed to feelings of self-doubt regarding their competence as a parent, and led some of the mothers to avoid social situations due to fears that they would experience further censure. However, some described how they were able to meet their own standards of being a 'good parent' through actions they took to protect their child, for example: 'enlisting teachers, psychologists and occupational therapists to support their child at school' or 'standing in the playground to ensure the child was not teased or bullied' (p. 3118). The authors suggest that 'these selfless acts confirmed to mothers that were good parents because they were acting in the best interests of the child' (p. 3118).

Although parents are encouraged to keep a close eye on their children's mental health and to seek professional help if they are concerned, research indicates that efforts to do so can be interpreted by teachers and other professionals working with children as 'over-parenting' if they do not agree with the parent's assessment of the situation. For example, Locke, Campbell, and Kavanagh (2012) conducted an online survey of professionals working with families and children about their observations of over-parenting. In this survey, over-parenting was defined as 'over-using valued parenting practices like

monitoring, protection or caring for their children', as well as a failure by parents to 'alter their parenting style as their children develop, to give them more independence or expect more from them' (p. 251). Among the examples respondents gave of this type of parenting were instances where a parent's 'high responsiveness to their child resulted in them believing that their child had mental health problems or special needs' (p. 255). When the professionals involved did not believe that the child had these issues or needs, the parent was seen to be advocating excessively on behalf of their child, and such action was taken as evidence of parental anxiety rather than any particular problem being experienced by the child.

Such responses can prove highly distressing for parents and potentially jeopardise children's access to necessary services. For example, Clarke (2012) interviewed mothers whose children had been diagnosed with a mental health issue about their attempts to seek assistance for their child. The study found that mothers' early attempts to raise concerns about their child were often dismissed by medical and other professionals as unfounded concerns about typical childhood behaviours or with assertions that the child was 'just eccentric' (Clarke, 2012, p. 361). Clarke argues that these mothers experienced 'surplus suffering', that is, suffering not only because of the difficulties their children experienced, but also 'suffering that results from, among other things, the failure to believe mothers as they describe the early symptoms of their child(ren)' (p. 363).

A number of studies have found that such encounters with health professionals represent a significant source of anxiety for many parents, who may avoid seeking assistance for their child rather than subject themselves to negative evaluations of their parenting (e.g. Edmunds, 2005; Frigerio, Montali, & Fine,

2013; McMaster, Beale, Hillege, & Nagy, 2004; Neill, Cowley, & Williams, 2013). Indeed, parents who demonstrate a high degree of involvement in their children's lives are increasingly seen as being in need of education or professional assistance to address what is considered to be a harmful approach to parenting (e.g. Hudson & Dodd, 2012; Marano, 2008; Munich & Munich, 2009; Segrin, Givertz, Swaitkowski, & Montgomery, 2015; Ungar, 2009). Further, Locke et al. (2012, p. 262-3) suggest that the harmful effects of over-parenting are not limited to children and parents, but are also 'likely to cause difficulties for schools in maintaining discipline and providing proper care and opportunities to allow children to experience appropriate maturational experiences'. In other words, it is suggested that by maintaining too close an involvement in their children's problems, parents may be undermining the work of schools.

Thus, the 'double bind' of parenting culture is such that although parents are seen to have primary responsibility for ensuring the wellbeing of their child, they are also encouraged to question their own competence as a parent and to seek the advice of experts. Parents who fail to follow professional recommendations about what is best for children are seen as a source of risk not only to their own children, but to society as a whole (Gillies, 2008; Hoffman, 2010). Accordingly, parents are seen to have a moral duty to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to be a 'good parent' (Gillies, 2011). I now turn to the final section of this chapter in which I consider the role of professional expertise in contemporary parenting culture and the implications this has for how parents see themselves in their role as a parent.

Professional Expertise

As noted at the outset of this chapter, a key feature of contemporary parenting culture is the vast array of advice which is available to help parents ensure the best possible outcomes for their child. From the early days of pregnancy women are monitored and advised by health professionals about what is best for the healthy development of their baby (Bell, McNaughton, & Salmon, 2009; Lupton, 2011, 2012b). Health problems or developmental delays in children are frequently attributed to the failure of mothers to conform to such advice (Lupton, 2011). Consequently, new mothers experience significant social pressure to adhere to professionally prescribed parenting practices. As Lupton (2012b, p. 338) observes, failure to do so is ‘to invite moral censure from others and feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame on oneself’. According to Pascoe (2015), such concerns are indicative of a broad cultural transformation which took place during the second half of the 20th century in which professional expertise came to be valued over more traditional forms of knowledge about childrearing:

In the late 1940s and 1950s, motherhood was viewed as intuitive and natural, a role that the majority of women adopted instinctively. Seventy years later, motherhood is viewed as a difficult occupation requiring training, specialist knowledge and expert advice. Women are encouraged to reject the misleading impulses of their intuition and the experiential advice of their mothers and grandmothers and place their trust in professionals (Pascoe, 2015, p. 219).

Ramaekers and Suissa (2012, p. 3) refer to these changes as the ‘scientisation of the parent-child relationship’ and describe how advice to parents has come to be dominated by findings from developmental psychology which emphasise the influence of a child’s early experiences on their future development.

From this perspective, parenting is seen as a future oriented activity in which parents undertake specific tasks in order to achieve a prescribed set of developmental outcomes for their child. In line with Smith (2010), Ramaekers and Suissa argue that this view of parenting can be seen as part of a broad move toward a culture of technical rationality whereby the value of human interactions are assessed in terms of their contribution towards particular outcomes. As Smeyers (2010, p. 272) notes, this trend is ‘nourished by the illusion that all problems can be solved, or at the very least their negative effects can be lessened, and there are experts who know how to do that’. Further, Lau (2012, p. 90) suggests that the current focus on the acquisition of ‘life-skills’ to help manage a range of relational and psychological problems is aligned with a modernist world view in which it is believed that ‘knowledge and expertise (i.e. reason) are able to devise formal, instrumental methods to eliminate life’s contingencies, thereby enabling complete control and certainty’.

Constructing ‘good parents’

In accordance with the turn to technical rationality as described above, ‘good parenting’ is increasingly associated with the acquisition of knowledge and skills deemed necessary for the production of healthy and responsible future citizens (Gillies, 2008). From a public health perspective, parents are often represented as the source of, and solution to, a range of problems affecting the general population including: obesity (Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010; Mainland et al., 2017), alcohol misuse (Čablová, Pazderková, & Mioviský, 2014; Ryan, Jorm, & Lubman, 2010) and road safety (Ward, Snow, Munro, Graham, & Dickson-Swift, 2012). Parent education is increasingly recommended as an effective means of initiating behavioural change to address these and other public health

issues (e.g. Carroll, Smith, & Thomson, 2015; O'Donnell, Myint-U, Duran, & Stueve, 2010; Salem, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2013).

Poor parenting is also frequently represented as the cause of anti-social behaviours in young people. As I will discuss in detail in the following chapter, school bullying is one such behaviour which is often associated with deficits in parenting (Herne, 2016; Lereya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013). The parenting practices of low income or socially disadvantaged groups in particular are often 'held up as the antithesis of good parenting, largely through their association with poor outcomes for children' (Gillies, 2008, p. 96). Constructed as a 'risk group', such parents have been a major focus of state-driven efforts to regulate social behaviour through parent education programs (Aldridge, Shute, Ralphs, & Medina, 2011; Holt, 2010; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). For example, concerns about parenting deficits were particularly evident in the United Kingdom following the London riots of 2011 when the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, publicly attributed the riots to poor parenting (Cameron, 2011), and in the following year there was an escalation of government funded programs to address perceived parenting deficits (De Benedictis, 2012; Furedi, 2012).

However, it is not only disadvantaged groups who are seen as being in need of expert advice with regard to parenting. In addition to targeted programs, parent education is increasingly framed as a preventative measure which is beneficial for all parents. As Lee (2014a, p. 65) observes, there is now a 'presumption that all parents should always look to experts for guidance about how to raise their children'. Accordingly, the past few decades have seen a proliferation of parent education initiatives intended to raise parenting standards and thereby contribute to improved developmental outcomes for children (Gilmer

et al., 2016; Ponzetti, 2016). One such program which has been widely used in Australia is the Triple P Positive Parenting Program. Developed by researchers at the University of Queensland, this program was specifically framed by its primary author as a 'public health model of parenting intervention' designed to 'make an impact at population level' (Sanders, 2008, p. 506). Recently, Sanders and Kirby (2014) have also drawn on positive evaluations of the Triple P program to argue that it should be delivered to a broad population of parents in order to reduce the risk of widespread social, emotional and behavioural problems in children. Thus, parent education initiatives can be seen as aligned with a deficit view of parents, whereby parents are constructed as a potential source of risk to their children due to their lack of expert knowledge (Furedi, 2008; Lam & Kwong, 2012; Lee et al., 2010).

In addition to formal parent education courses, popular advice manuals, magazines, television shows and the internet also provide detailed instruction on how to be a 'good parent' (Aarsand, 2011, 2014; Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014; Hoffman, 2010). In this way, parents are 'positioned as novices in relation to those with expertise' and are 'expected to be attentive and receptive to expert advice' (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011, p. 84). As Aarsand (2011) illustrates in her analysis of dialogues between parents and a therapist on a Swedish television show, power relations between experts and parents are represented in the media as asymmetrical with little room for collaborative effort to solve problems. In addition, parenthood is portrayed in the media as an ongoing curriculum and parents are encouraged to continuously seek opportunities to improve their parenting skills: 'Parenting is construed as a process where the main task is improvement of the adult's behaviour. No matter

how good you are, there is always more that can be done' (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011, p. 84). As Vansieleghem (2010, p. 352) observes, within current discourses of parental expertise and advice parents are seen as being in need of 'permanent monitoring, coaching and feedback' to help them care for children in a rapidly changing world. Consequently, contemporary parents 'find themselves in a permanent state of becoming' (Vansieleghem, 2010, p. 353).

Performing parenthood

Critics of the emphasis on professional expertise in contemporary parenting culture argue that it has a negative impact on how parents see themselves in their role as a parent and the ways in which they relate to their children. For example, Furedi (2008) claims that efforts to improve parenting skills through education and support services have, paradoxically, served to undermine parents' confidence in their own judgement and reinforce their dependence on experts. He argues that, rather than empowering parents, 'professional intervention often involves putting parents in their place as inept amateurs' (Furedi, 2008, p. 172). Stearns (2003) also notes the negative impact this culture of advice has had on parents' confidence in their performance as a parent, and suggests that the sheer amount of advice which is available serves to compound rather than alleviate parents' anxieties about how best to care for their children.

As Lupton (2012a, p. 2) has argued, the pervasive influence of expert advice in contemporary parenting culture can be seen as a form of neoliberal governance in which 'parents are encouraged to construct themselves as responsible citizens through caring for their children'. Through expert advice about what constitutes 'good parenting', parents are encouraged to align

themselves with particular ways of behaving in relation to their children, and thus ‘participate in their own self-regulation’ (Macfarlane, 2008, p. 711). A key part of this process is the cultivation of a sense of self which supports neoliberal tenets of individualism, reflexivity and rational choice.

Despite the diverse range of parenting advice on offer, a common assumption of such advice is that parents can, and should, make choices about the kind of parent they want to be. As Jensen (2010, p. 177) observes:

The very rehearsal of arguments about how to parent—indeed the very labour of selecting a body of expertise to adopt—invites a new relationship to oneself as a parent, an investment in reflexive parenting, intensive, expert-guided, thoughtful, and self-scrutinising.

Jensen suggests that, from this perspective, it does not matter how parents answer the question of what kind of parent they want to be, ‘since *it is through the process of asking it* that one is able to produce oneself as a reflexive neoliberal parent’ (Jensen, 2010, p. 178). And yet, as Jensen also points out, the range of possible selves from which parents may choose is limited by dominant discourses of parenting which ‘deploy a psychological ethic, in which the material world and all its inequalities recede, and the unitary subject takes centre stage’ (Jensen, 2010 p. 177). Using examples from the popular parenting television show *Supernanny*, Jensen argues that such discourse provides a narrow view of family relations, whereby the problems parents experience in regard to their children are represented solely in psychological terms as ‘failures at the level of the self’ with no consideration of the broader contexts in which these experiences are located (Jensen, 2010, p. 182).

Similarly, Ramaekers and Suissa (2012) argue that the dominance of scientific discourses of parenting, which focus on the achievement of specific developmental outcomes ‘threatens to reduce the way parents perceive themselves and their children, and the way in which they relate to their children, to the frameworks offered to them’ (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012, p. 143). As Lambeir and Ramaekers (2007, p. 105) have argued, this has resulted in the ‘alienation of parents from their own parenting. The discourse of the “expert mom” and the “skilful dad” has distanced parents from *being a parent* and made them *act like good ones*’.

What would seem to be at stake here is parents’ moral agency to ask the question: ‘What is important for *me*, here, now, in relation to *my child*’ (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012, p. xi), rather than feeling compelled to comply with an external view of what ‘the child’ may need as determined by expert opinion. However, in recent years a small number of researchers have begun to explore the complex ways in which parents position themselves in relation to expert discourses of parenting (e.g. Aarsand, 2014; Geinger, Vandenbroeck, & Roets, 2014; Widding, 2015). These studies suggest that parents are not passive recipients of expert advice, but ‘agentic beings both contesting and complying with dominant discourses’ (Geinger et al., 2014, p. 498). For example, Aarsand (2014) interviewed parents about their responses to parenting advice they encountered in the media and found that participants strongly resisted being positioned as passive recipients of expert parenting advice. Rather, participants performed as already ‘knowledgeable’ in regard to effective parenting techniques by displaying how they were able to ‘identify, understand, explain, clarify, discriminate and evaluate what is being offered in media encounters’ (p. 630).

According to Aarsand, it is through such discursive means that participants were able to fashion themselves as responsible and capable parents whilst distancing themselves from an assumed audience of ‘other parents’ who were seen to be struggling and in need of expert advice. Further, she describes how participants were often sceptical of the value of the advice on offer, particularly in television shows such as *Supernanny*, which one mother described as ‘brain dead entertainment’ (Aarsand, 2014, p. 633). And yet, this same mother also told how she had used ‘the naughty step’, a discipline strategy recommended in the show, to good effect with her own children. However, in recounting how she came to adopt this strategy, she also told how she had selected, evaluated and refined the strategy to suit her own situation, and thus ‘avoids appearing as a passive receiver, or a parent who just copies what the experts exhort as correct’ (Aarsand, 2014, p. 634).

By paying close attention to the nuances in how these parents position themselves in relation to dominant discourses of parenting, Aarsand highlights the performative nature of parent identities, which are ‘constantly negotiated, adjusted to and contested in the myriad of personal, private and public spheres where we live our lives’ (Aarsand, 2014, p. 638). In line with Butler’s (1990) theory of identity as performative and discursively produced, Geinger et al. (2014, p. 490) have argued that ‘one needs to consider parenting as a form of “performativity” and therefore a doing, a becoming, rather than a being. Being a parent is not just a status, but also a performance’. In contrast to a view of parents as passive victims of dominant discourses of parenting, studies which attend to the nuances in how parents perform parenthood, suggest that it is through their engagement with dominant discourses of parenting that parents are able to construct themselves in

particular ways and thus claim agency for themselves. As Butler (1990, p. 147) has argued, ‘construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency’.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a review of research relating to contemporary parenting culture. In particular, I have shown how notions of individual responsibility, the management of risk and the perceived need for professional expertise underpin broad cultural understandings about what constitutes ‘good parenting’. I have also shown how these understandings are related to broader sociocultural changes which have taken place in Western societies in the late modern age, such as the rise of neoliberalism and an increasing focus on the role of individuals in determining their future life chances. From this perspective, parents can be seen as powerful agents in ensuring their children’s health, happiness and future success in life. However, at the same time, parents are constructed as a potential risk to their children through their lack of expert knowledge about child development. In this way, parents are understood to have a moral responsibility to engage with, and be directed by, expert advice about the best ways to care for their children.

Taken together, these ideas form strong cultural narratives about the roles and responsibilities of parents. Key critics of contemporary parenting culture have argued that these narratives serve to disempower parents, and limit the ways in which they are able to relate to their children. However, an emerging body of research which attends to the tensions and ambiguities in how parents position themselves in relation to dominant discourses of ‘good parenting’ suggests that a

more complex process of identity construction and power relations is at work.

The present study aims to contribute to this body of work by exploring the ways in which parents draw on these broad cultural understandings about the roles and responsibilities of parents as they recount their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school. In the following chapter I consider how these broad cultural understandings relate to existing research on parents and school bullying.

Chapter 3: Parents in School Bullying Research

Introduction

In this chapter I provide a review of existing research on parents and school bullying, and consider how the research is located within broad cultural narratives about the roles and responsibilities of parents as outlined in the previous chapter. In particular, I show how research in this area has largely focussed on ways in which parents contribute to the causes of bullying, and what they can do to reduce the risk of their child becoming either a perpetrator or a victim of bullying. To date, very little research has been conducted from the perspectives of parents themselves, and little is known about how parents experience their interactions with schools about bullying. In reviewing the extant research, I also consider how it relates to ideas about power relations and the construction of parent identities which were introduced in the previous chapter. Taken together, these two chapters provide a detailed picture of the discursive environment in which parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools.

A further purpose of the present chapter is to show how existing research on parents and school bullying is located within ongoing debates about the nature of bullying and how best to address the problem. Over the past few decades a vast amount of research has investigated school bullying from a variety of theoretical perspectives (Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011; Postigo, González, Montoya, & Ordoñez, 2013). These differing perspectives have important implications for how bullying is conceptualised, the types of solutions proposed (Galitz & Robert, 2014; Walton, 2011), and the ways in which various

stakeholders, including parents, are represented (Mitchell & Borg, 2013). The chapter is organised around four key theoretical perspectives which underpin existing research on parents in relation to school bullying: (1) psychological conceptualisations of bullying as individual pathological behaviour; (2) socio-ecological conceptualisations of bullying as a systemic problem; (3) interpretive conceptualisations of bullying as a social and interactional process and (4) post-structural conceptualisations of bullying as a product of power relations and processes of subjectification through social and cultural practices. In what follows, I provide an overview of these differing theoretical perspectives on bullying and discuss the implications that each has for broad cultural narratives about the roles and responsibilities of parents in relation to bullying.

Psychological Approaches

Psychological conceptualisations of bullying as individual pathological behaviour have long held a prominent place in school bullying research. Early studies conducted in Scandinavia by Dan Olweus (1978, 1980) focussed on identifying personality traits typical of children who exhibit bullying or victim behaviours. In the decades since, a vast amount of research has investigated associations between these behaviours and children's psychological deficits. For example, studies have found that children who bully lack impulse control (Slee & Rigby, 1993), have high levels of anger (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999) and hyperactivity (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009) and demonstrate callous-unemotional personality traits (Muñoz, Qualter, & Padgett, 2011). Children who are victimised have been found to have low self-esteem (Egan & Perry, 1998; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999), high levels of anxiety

(Bernstein & Watson, 1997) and demonstrate poor coping strategies (Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001).

Recent critiques of school bullying research have noted the continued dominance of psychological approaches which focus on the personal deficits of children categorised as ‘bullies’ and ‘victims’ (Duncan, 2013; Meyer, 2014; Mitchell & Borg, 2013; Schott, 2014; Walton, 2011). Such findings have been highly influential in framing bullying as a problem to be addressed at the level of individuals. This is evident in disciplinary and social skills training strategies which are routinely used by schools in response to bullying, and which focus on changing the behaviour of individual ‘bullies’ and ‘victims’ (Duncan, 2013; Walton, 2011). Researchers have argued that a major limitation of psychological approaches is that they fail to take account of broader social and cultural influences which underlie bullying behaviours (Carrera et al., 2011; Coleyshaw, 2010; Mitchell & Borg, 2013; Ryan & Morgan, 2011; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Walton, 2005, 2011). Further, they entail simplistic conceptualisations of power as something which is held at an individual level, and do not consider how power functions at an institutional or societal level. As Coleyshaw (2010) notes, the attraction of psychological approaches for policy makers is that findings can more easily be translated into ‘curative’ interventions than those which take into account broader institutional and societal levels of influence. In addition, the danger of bullying intervention programs which emphasise solutions at an individual level is that they can lead to a blaming culture in which ‘both those being bullied and those bullying are seen to be the authors of their own inadequacies and carry the burden of individual responsibility to rectify these failings’ (Ryan & Morgan, 2011, p. 24).

Parents as risk and protective factors

Since the early studies of school bullying conducted in Scandinavia by Dan Olweus (1978, 1980, 1993), parents and parenting behaviours have figured prominently in research which attempts to identify risk and protective factors associated with school bullying. For example, in a study of aggression in adolescent boys Olweus (1980) found that a lack of warmth displayed by mothers towards their sons, mothers' permissive attitudes towards aggressive behaviour and the use of harsh physical punishments by mothers and fathers increased the likelihood of boys acting aggressively towards others. Although these findings were based on research with boys, Olweus later extended his conclusions about the central role of child-rearing practices in the development of bullying behaviours to include both boys and girls (Olweus, 1993).

Explanations for the personal deficits of children who bully and those who are victimised have been sought in theories from developmental psychology which afford a crucial role for parents and parenting behaviours in children's healthy psychosocial development. For example, attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988) posits that children who are deprived of a secure attachment with a primary caregiver in their early years are at risk of a range of psychological and behavioural difficulties. A number of studies have drawn links between poor attachment in early childhood and increased risk of later involvement in bullying situations (Eliot & Cornell, 2009; Nikiforou, Georgiou, & Stavrinides, 2013; Troy & Sroufe, 1987; Walden & Beran, 2010). According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), children learn to behave aggressively by repeatedly observing such behaviour modelled by adults. In line with this, a number of studies have investigated associations between parenting styles and the

development of bullying behaviours. Harsh, punitive forms of discipline and parental anger towards children have been found to be associated with children's bullying behaviours at school (e.g. Baldry, 2003; Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Christie-Mizell, 2003; Curtner-Smith et al., 2006; Shetgiri, Lin, & Flores, 2013). Studies have also focussed on parenting behaviours which may increase the risk of children being victimised at school. For example, over-protective mothering has been found to increase the likelihood that boys will be victimised (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1994; Georgiou, 2008; Olweus, 1993), whereas maternal rejection increases the risk for girls (Finnegan, Hodges, & Perry, 1998).

A further concern in psychologically based school bullying research has been the identification of parenting styles which may act as protective factors against children's involvement in bullying. Authoritative parenting, characterised by warmth, responsiveness and consistent, non-physical methods of discipline, has been found to minimise the risk of children engaging in bullying behaviour (Baldry & Farrington, 2005) and to offer some protection against victimisation (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffit, & Arseneault, 2010; Ladd & Ladd, 1998).

In sum, a significant amount of research evidence has been gathered to support the claim that maladaptive parenting increases the risk of children becoming involved in bullying situations (for a meta-analytic review see Lereya et al., 2013). These research findings have given rise to numerous recommendations for family-based interventions which focus on improving parenting skills (e.g. Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Georgiou, 2008; Jaynes, 2008; Nickerson, Mele, & Osborne-Oliver, 2010). In a review of research relating to parenting, family life and school bullying, Rigby (2013) highlighted the importance of parent education and training in efforts to reduce bullying in

schools. Advice provided to teachers also suggests that as part of responses to bullying situations teachers should offer parents information about recommended parenting and disciplinary practices (Porter, 2008, p. 146). It is not surprising then, that although researchers have cautioned against interpreting the findings outlined above as evidence that parents cause bullying and victimization (Georgiou & Stavriniades, 2013; Nickerson et al., 2010), teachers often look to the home environment for the source of bullying problems at school (Green, Harcourt, Mattioni, & Prior, 2013; Hein, 2014; Rigby & Barrington, 2002).

I contend that such a focus on parents as risk and protective factors can be seen as part of broad cultural understandings about parental responsibility and the management of risk. As discussed in the previous chapter, parents are increasingly seen to be responsible for the management of a wide range of risks to their children's health, safety and future life chances. At the same time, parents are understood to be a source of potential risk to their children and to society as a whole due to deficits in their parenting. Thus, within these broad cultural understandings, parents are positioned as having a moral duty to adopt specific parenting practices as recommended in research in order to reduce the risk of their children becoming either 'bullies' or 'victims'.

Socio-Ecological Approaches

Although conceptualisations of bullying as an individual psychological problem continue to inform school bullying research, over the past decade research has also begun to draw on socio-ecological conceptualisations of bullying as a systemic problem (e.g. Barboza et al., 2009; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Swearer & Espelage, 2004). Drawing on

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development, socio-ecological theory contends that bullying cannot be understood as a problem arising solely from individual personality traits. Rather, it is the result of complex interactions between individuals and influences in their environment including: family, peer group, school and community and cultural influences (Swearer & Espelage, 2004). Socio-ecological models of bullying represent these factors as part of four nested system levels surrounding individuals: micro-system (immediate environments), meso-system (links between two or more micro-systems), exo-system (settings that influence micro-systems) and macro-systems (broader social and cultural influences).

These theoretical understandings have been highly influential in the development of whole-school approaches to bullying prevention which are said to entail a 'shift from a focus on fixing individuals to that of creating healthy systems' (Cahill, Morrison, & Griffiths, 2007, p. 9). Whole-school approaches are widely recommended by researchers and policy makers alike as the most effective strategy to reduce school bullying (Cross, Monks, et al., 2011; Mishna, 2012; Ttofi & Farrington, 2009; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). However, although there has been significant support for the application of socio-ecological theory in prevention, empirical research based on these ideas has been slower to evolve. In part this is due to the complexity of the model and the difficulty of accounting for a broad range of reciprocal influences (Espelage & Swearer, 2010).

Parents as partners

From a socio-ecological perspective, parents are understood to be one of a number of interacting 'micro-systems,' which may have direct or indirect influence on the development of bullying behaviours. In contrast to psychological

approaches which investigate parental influences in isolation from other contextual factors, socio-ecological studies have attempted to determine reciprocal relationships between parenting influences and a range of individual, peer, school and neighbourhood factors (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Lee, 2011; Lee & Song, 2012). The picture which emerges from these studies is extremely complex and suggests that ‘there are no simple explanations for bullying’ (Swearer Napolitano & Espelage, 2011, pp. 4-5).

A particularly complex area of investigation in socio-ecological studies of school bullying relates to the effects of parental involvement at school. As discussed in the previous chapter, partnerships between parents and schools are increasingly seen as a key component of efforts to improve children’s educational outcomes. From a socio-ecological perspective, parental involvement at school is thought to be an important way in which parents function as part of the meso-system which links home and school environments (Lee & Song, 2012) . However, although parental involvement at school has long been recognised as an important factor in children’s academic success (Epstein, Salinas, & Connors, 1993), the findings from studies investigating the influence of parental involvement on bullying behaviours at school have been mixed (Jeynes, 2008). While some studies have found that low parental involvement at school is associated with higher levels of school bullying (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007), a study by Hong and Eamon (2012) found that parental involvement at school was not related to students’ perceptions of safety at school.

Nonetheless, the research literature contains numerous recommendations for increased parental involvement to help reduce school bullying (e.g. Holt, Kaufman Kantor, & Finkelhor, 2008; Rigby, 2013; Robinson, 2013; Ttofi &

Farrington, 2011). However, the recommended nature of this involvement is commonly at the level of parent education and training. According to Galitz and Robert (2014, pp. 5-6), such parent education programs 'rest on the assumption that bullying is linked to a lack of information...it is expected that with the proper information everyone will do the right thing and bullying will likely decrease'. Here, I concur with researchers who argue that such a focus on parent education in response to social problems is aligned with a deficit view of parents, whereby parents are constructed as a risk to their children due to their lack of expert knowledge of child development and effective parenting techniques (Furedi, 2008; Gillies, 2008; Hoffman, 2010; Lam & Kwong, 2012; Lee et al., 2010).

Although socio-ecological conceptualisations of bullying as a systemic problem have done much to shift the focus of research beyond individual pathologies, as Schott and Søndergaard (2014, p. 8) observe, there is still a tendency for interventions to 'concentrate on specific problems associated with individual children' rather than addressing broader social and cultural dimensions of bullying. This perhaps relates to the way in which, as noted by Espelage (2014, p. 261), socio-ecological research has tended to focus on micro-systems in a 'piecemeal way' and has yet to consider 'complex interactions within and across ecological systems'. With respect to parents, there is a clear need for research which moves beyond a focus on family pathologies, and considers how parents are positioned within and across other ecological systems, including social and cultural system levels.

Interpretive Approaches

As noted previously, researchers have critiqued psychological approaches to bullying research on the basis that they fail to take account of the complex social and cultural dimensions of bullying. As Mitchell and Borg (2013, p. 152) argue, a focus on ‘individualised pathology requiring intervention and correction, acts to further negate the existence of bullying within relations between people, while also reducing understandings of its complexity’. An alternative approach is provided by interpretive studies which attempt to elucidate the complexity of bullying as a social phenomenon by focussing on the experiences and subjective interpretations of those involved (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Thornberg, 2015; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). From this perspective, bullying is conceptualised as a social and interactional process which is ‘always relational and situational; that is, it is not an individual problem, but one with social and cultural dimensions’ (Danby & Osvaldsson, 2011, p. 255).

Parent voices

As I have shown, much of the extant research relating to parents and school bullying focuses on ways in which parenting behaviours may contribute to or protect against bullying. Although parents are represented in the literature as a crucial element in the prevention of school bullying (Rigby, 2013; Robinson, 2013), very little research on the topic has been conducted from the perspectives of parents themselves (Harcourt et al., 2014; Sawyer et al., 2011). However, in the past decade a small number of qualitative studies have explored the experiences of parents whose children have been bullied (Brown et al., 2013; Ford, 2013; Harcourt et al., 2015; Humphrey & Crisp, 2008; Sawyer et al., 2011). A key concern in these studies is to represent the ‘voices’ and ‘lived experiences’ of

parents whose children have been bullied at school. The studies make use of interpretive research methodologies to explore the complexity of parents' experiences in relation to school bullying and the meanings they make of these experiences. For example, Brown et al. (2013) drew on interpretive phenomenology to explore the 'lived experiences' of parents who had reported bullying to schools, and sought to provide an analysis which stayed 'as close as possible to the experience itself' (Brown et al., 2013, p. 6). The study gives rich descriptions of parents' subjective interpretations of their experiences of discovering that their child had been bullied, reporting the bullying to their child's school and the aftermath of reporting the bullying.

A number of themes which emerge from these studies highlight the importance of understanding the relational contexts in which bullying and responses to it take place. For example, many of the parents in these studies experienced a sense of isolation and shame as they attempted to seek support for their children (Brown et al., 2013; Ford, 2013; Humphrey & Crisp, 2008). Conflicting interpretations about what constitutes bullying and who is responsible for intervening also led to adversarial relations between parents and school staff, which often served to escalate the problem (Ford, 2013; Harcourt et al., 2015; Humphrey & Crisp, 2008). For some parents, the effort of supporting their bullied child also created further relational stress within the family (Ford, 2013).

By focussing on parents' subjective interpretations of these broader relational aspects of bullying, this small body of research makes an important contribution to understandings of bullying as a social process which extends beyond individual 'bullies' and 'victims'. Taken together, the studies emphasise a sense of powerlessness experienced by parents in relation to school bullying.

However, a limitation of these studies is that they provide little analysis of how such experiences of powerlessness may be produced within broader systems of power. In the following section I discuss research which explores how parents' experiences in relation to bullying are produced within social and cultural systems of power.

Post-Structural Approaches

In recent years, a growing number of researchers have drawn on post-structural conceptualisations of power to understand how bullying functions as a product of broader social and cultural systems (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnell, 2009; Davies, 2011; Ellwood & Davies, 2010; Jacobson, 2010, 2013; Ryan & Morgan, 2011; Saltmarsh, Robinson, & Davies, 2012; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Søndergaard, 2012; Walton, 2011). In contrast to psychological approaches to bullying research in which power is understood to be held by individuals, these studies draw on Michel Foucault's notion of power as a product of social relations. As Ryan and Morgan (2011, p. 24) explain:

Power according to Foucault, does not belong to any particular group or institution, but rather, the discourses that historically, culturally and socially are taken as 'common sense' will be those that are accepted as 'knowledge' and 'truth', and sustain social power relations.

From this perspective bullying is conceptualised as a discursively produced phenomenon which functions to sustain dominant social and moral orders.

Discourse, and the role it plays in the construction of particular identities in relation to bullying, is therefore a major focus of post-structural approaches to school bullying research. For example, Jacobson (2010) draws on Foucault's

contention that human subjectivity is produced through systems of power operating through specific discourses and practices, to explore how the subject position of 'bully' is shaped by discourses and practices of schooling. Jacobson argues that rather than simply the product of innate characteristics or family circumstances, bullies are 'made' by discourses and practices of schooling which rank one student against the other through systems of measurement and comparison. He suggests that 'bullying and schooling reflect the same culture; a culture that provides status by rising above (dominating) those around us' (Jacobson, 2010, p. 255).

According to Jacobson (2010, p. 275), the 'bully is a narrated character', a subject position which is produced by, and embedded in, hierarchical cultures of schooling. Similarly, Ellwood and Davies (2010, p. 94) argue that within discourses of bullying there are particular subject positions, such as 'hard core toughies' or 'the ones we need to watch' which are 'positions waiting for individual subjects to occupy them, to be known through them, to be constituted by them'. A key concern in post-structural approaches to bullying research is to understand how individuals are labelled according to such subject positions, and further, how these discursive practices contribute to the perpetuation of bullying. Researchers have argued that by positioning individuals as 'bullies' or 'victims', bullying is represented as a problem to be addressed at the level of individuals, without disrupting the dominant social and moral orders which function to sustain it (Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Ryan & Morgan, 2011; Walton, 2011).

Positioning parents

To date, only very limited research has applied post-structural approaches to the study of parents in relation to school bullying. One such study by Clarke,

Kitzinger, and Potter (2004) used discourse analysis to explore lesbian and gay parents' accounts of their children's experiences of homophobic bullying. The authors note that the prime concern of a discursive approach to this topic is 'not establishing the "truth" about bullying, but how bullying is talked about, and what actions different accounts of bullying are designed to perform' (Clarke et al., 2004, p. 533). In their analysis, Clarke et al. (2004) identified ways in which participants' accounts minimized and normalized their children's experiences of homophobic bullying. They interpret these accounts in the context of wider heterosexist discourses in which lesbian and gay parents are often represented as being accountable for the homophobic bullying their children experience. They suggest that in this context, lesbian and gay parents who claim homophobic bullying risk being accused of irresponsible parenting, whilst those who claim no bullying are likely to be viewed as implausible. Further, they suggest that participants in the study constructed their accounts to manage this dilemma of accountability by acknowledging their children's experiences of bullying but portraying them as part of the normal, inevitable 'landscape of childhood, as, indeed, non-accountable' (Clarke et al., 2004, p. 456). Although the authors acknowledge that their argument here is only tentative and further analyses of similar data is required, the value of this study is that it illustrates the complex ways in which individual parents' accounts of bullying intersect with public narratives about bullying and parental responsibility.

More recently, Hein (2014, 2016) has explored how broad cultural understandings about parenting and bullying contribute to parents' experiences of powerlessness in discussions with schools about bullying. For this research, Hein interviewed 12 parents who had approached schools about their children's reports

of being bullied. Hein argues that in contacting the school about the bullying, these parents were ‘attempting to act as responsible and caring parents by participating in home-school cooperation’ (Hein, 2014, p. 306). She suggests that in doing so, these parents were drawing on broad cultural understandings about parental responsibility for overseeing their children’s wellbeing, including in those contexts where they cannot always be present, such as schools. However, parents told of being met with responses from the school which discounted their role as a ‘legitimate partner in cooperation with the school’ (Hein, 2014, p. 306). Parents were led to understand that either the school had the situation under control, or that the situation was not as their child had represented it. School staff often attributed children’s experiences of being bullied at school to problems with how they are parented at home and suggested specific parenting strategies to remediate the situation. When these strategies failed to resolve the bullying, and parents again contacted the school, they found that they were viewed by staff as ‘trouble makers’.

Common themes in parents’ accounts relate to the sense of scrutiny they felt in their interactions with schools, and concerns about what *kind* of parent school staff perceived them to be. Hein’s analysis draws attention to the way in which parents in the study were aware of, and sought to distance themselves from, various parental stereotypes such as ‘disadvantaged single mother’ or ‘the doting, over-protective parent’. She argues that these stereotypes represent widespread cultural understandings which underlie how schools interpret and explain parents’ responses to their child’s reports of bullying. Just as children are positioned as ‘bullies’ or ‘victims’ and their behaviour interpreted and explained in terms of these categories, so too parents are assigned to certain subject positions which

serve to disempower them in their interactions with schools. Further, Hein contends that as parents attempt to negotiate these social dynamics, they ‘risk escalating, expanding and becoming part of the conflicts as well as the violating, exclusionary dynamics from which they originally sought to rescue their child’ (Hein, 2014, p. 327).

As Hein’s research illustrates, the ways in which parents and teachers respond to students’ reports of bullying can have a crucial impact on whether or not the situation is resolved or continues, and indeed escalates. Research indicates that the longer a bullying situation continues, the greater the risk of long-term ill effects (Wolke et al., 2013). As such, there is a need for research which contributes to detailed understandings of how parents experience reporting incidents of bullying to schools and the types of barriers they may face in advocating with schools on behalf of their child. I suggest that research which attends to the multiple and shifting ways in which parents are positioned, and position themselves, in the social and cultural environments in which bullying, and responses to it, take place, has much to offer in facilitating such understandings. Specifically, such an approach can provide important insights into the complex ways in which parents’ responses to bullying are negotiated within broader cultural understandings about the roles and responsibilities of parents.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a review of research which relates to parents and school bullying. In particular, I have shown how prevailing representations of parents in terms of responsibility and risk are a product of the

dominance of psychological conceptualisations of bullying as individual pathological behaviour which stems from child development problems associated with poor parenting. Proposed solutions in the form of parent education align with a deficit view of parents as a potential risk to their children through their lack of knowledge and skills in relation to parenting. I contend that this provides a limited view of parents in relation to a complex social and cultural problem. Although socio-ecological approaches to school bullying research have drawn attention to the social and relational contexts in which bullying takes place, there is much that is left unanswered by these studies about how individual experiences are situated within broader social and cultural systems of power.

As yet, only a handful of studies have explored school bullying from the perspectives of parents themselves. These studies emphasise the sense of powerlessness that parents often feel as they attempt to engage with schools about incidents of bullying. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, an emerging body of research indicates that power relations between parents and professionals who work with children are often far more complex than it would first appear. Close analysis of how parents position themselves in relation to broad cultural understandings about the roles and responsibilities of parents reveals a dynamic process of identity construction through which parents claim moral agency for themselves in varied, and often quite subtle, ways. In line with research which aims to elucidate rather than reduce such complexity, the present study pays close attention to the tensions and ambiguities in parents' narrative accounts of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools. In the following chapter I outline the methodological framework for the study and discuss how it supports the broad aims and guiding principles of the research.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I describe the methodological framework for this study, including its theoretical orientation and the methods used to undertake the research. In particular, I explain how the study draws on narrative research methodologies in which it is assumed that ‘social life is storied’ and ‘experience is constituted through narratives’ (Somers, 1994, p. 614). Further, I explain how the study is informed by dialogical approaches to research which contribute to understandings of the social world by deeply engaging with, rather than reducing, complexity. As Frank (2012, p. 37) explains, a key commitment of dialogical analysis is ‘not to summarize *findings*...but rather, to open continuing possibilities of listening and responding to what is heard. Analysis aims at increasing people’s possibilities for hearing themselves and others’. Accordingly, in this study I do not seek to discover a particular ‘truth’ or establish a chain of causality in relation to parents’ experiences of reporting bullying to schools. Rather, my primary aim in this research is to contribute to rich understandings of how parents make sense of these experiences. As I discuss further in this chapter, narrative research methods which attend to resonances and multiple layers of meaning within and across personal accounts of experience are well suited to this task.

The chapter is divided into two sections. I begin by providing an overview of the narrative orientation of the study and the key theoretical concepts which underpin it, including Arthur Frank’s (2013) typology of restitution, chaos and quest narratives. I then describe the specific methods used to carry out the research and discuss how these processes support the aims of the research.

Theoretical Orientation

As noted above, my primary aim in this research is to contribute to rich understandings of how parents experience reporting bullying to schools and the meanings they make of these experiences. From this perspective, the research fits comfortably with qualitative approaches which ‘allow researchers to explore issues from the perspectives of those directly involved’ (Hansen, 2006, p. 1). In addition, qualitative approaches allow detailed exploration of the meanings people make of their experiences, which in turn contribute to an understanding of how people respond to those experiences (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Further, the design of the study is underpinned by social constructionist understandings of language as a form of social action. In this view it is assumed that human beings construct social reality through their interactions, and it is through social interactions that we produce knowledge about the world and ourselves. As Burr (2003, p. 8) explains, ‘When people talk to each other the world gets constructed.’ From this perspective, language does not merely represent the world but is constitutive of it, and it is through language that people are guided in their interpretations and their actions (Gergen, 1999).

A narrative approach

The methodological approach I have chosen for this study derives from the broad ‘narrative turn’ in the human sciences which has taken place over the past 30 years in which the stories people tell about themselves and what happens to them in their lives have come to be regarded as rich sources of data about the social world (Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011). Researchers from a variety of disciplines have drawn on ideas of narrative and story to contribute to

understandings of the social world, for example: psychology (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986), anthropology (Geertz, 1988; Van Maanen, 1988), organizational studies (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997), and education (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Conle, 2000).

However, within this tradition there are a range of views regarding the nature of narrative, how it relates to the social world and how best to study it (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012; Squire, 2008). A key debate in this regard relates to divisions between micro and macro social constructionist approaches. Micro social constructionist approaches focus on the ‘linguistic minutiae’ of the immediate social interactions in which personal narratives are produced (Esin, Fathi, & Squire, 2013, p. 4), whereas macro social constructionist approaches focus on how personal narratives are located within broader social and cultural contexts. As Chase (2001, p. 155) explains:

...the stories people tell about their lives are empirical phenomena in which biography, institution and culture intersect. Attending to those intersections within people’s narratives allows us to understand more fully the constraining and enabling nature of particular social environments as well as patterns and variations in how individuals (or groups) come to terms with those environments.

The narrative approach I have taken in this study aligns with this broader level of cultural analysis. In particular, the study is informed by a ‘storied resource perspective’ (Smith & Sparkes, 2008), which emphasises the shared cultural resources that people use to construct their identities. According to Smith and Sparkes (2008, p. 19), ‘storied resource perspectives take seriously narrative as a form of social practice in which individuals draw from a cultural repertoire of stories larger than themselves that they then assemble into personal stories’. This

aligns with Somers' (1994, p. 613-4) view of narrative as 'an ontological condition of social life'. She argues that 'people construct their identities by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories' and further, that they are guided in their actions by 'a limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives' (Somers, 1994, p. 614). Thus, stories do not merely represent experiences that have already taken place. Rather, as Frank (2010, p. 21) explains, there is a complex process of 'mutual mimesis' between stories and experiences as people see the possibilities around them according to stories they already know: 'Life and story imitate each other, ceaselessly and seamlessly, but neither enjoys temporal or causal precedence.'

However, as Smith and Sparkes (2008, p. 20) point out, there can be 'slippage or discontinuities between the received public or meta cultural narratives and the way these storylines are narratively applied by the individual'. In this way, stories of personal experience are the product of the narrative repertoire of a particular social context and 'the creative agency of the storyteller' (Sandberg, Tutenges, & Copes, 2015, p. 1171). As Bamberg (2005, p. 225) observes, people are constantly 'juggling several storylines simultaneously' as they try to make sense of their experiences and position themselves in relation to self and other. Accordingly, in this study, agency is understood as an ongoing process which is negotiated in relation to the subject positions that are available within particular storylines (Bamberg, 2005; Davies & Harré, 1999). As Portelli (cited in Frank (2010), p. 102) puts it: 'Each person is a crossroads of many *potential* stories, of possibilities imagined and not taken, of dangers skirted and barely avoided.' In line with this, the study draws on Bakhtinian notions of the self as dialogical and

always constructed in relation to other voices. As Frigerio et al. (2013, p. 4) explain:

The concept of discursive positioning conceptually refers to the Bakhtinian notions of multivocality and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981: 426) because every act of positioning is situated within the context of multiple social discourses, a condition that Bakhtin calls ‘heteroglossia’ (1981: 263, 428). Within this ‘corridor of voices’ (Bakhtin, 1986: 121) the construction of meaning is structurally relational and dialogical.

Narrative types: Restitution, chaos and quest

As noted previously, a key concern in this study is the type of agency that parents claim for themselves as they narrate their experiences of reporting bullying. In particular, the study explores links between broad cultural narratives about the roles and responsibilities of parents and how parents represent themselves in their stories of reporting bullying. The approach I have used to explore these issues draws on the work of sociologist Arthur Frank, (2002, 2005, 2010, 2012, 2013), which examines how personal stories of experience are constructed from a common stock of narrative types. As Frank (2013, p. 75) explains:

A narrative type is the most general storyline that can be recognized underlying the plot and tensions of particular stories. People tell their own unique stories, but they compose these stories by adapting and combining narrative types that cultures make available.

Importantly for the purposes of this study, Frank (2012, pp. 46-47) argues that different narrative types afford different kinds of agency to the storyteller:

‘As surely as people are positioned by such variables as income, education, and ethnicity, they are positioned by the stories they know and feel comfortable telling.’ In his most widely cited work, *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995, 2013), Frank provides a detailed description of three narrative types which underlie most personal stories of illness: restitution, chaos and quest. The key features of each of these narrative types are as follows:

The restitution narrative has the basic storyline of ‘yesterday I was healthy, today I am sick, but tomorrow I’ll be healthy again’ (Frank, 2013, p. 77). In restitution narratives agency lies with those who provide the remedy to the illness while the storyteller is cast as an ‘almost exclusively passive character’ (Frank, 2010, p. 118).

The chaos narrative is the opposite of the restitution narrative in that ‘its plot imagines life never getting better’ (Frank, 2013, p. 97). A key feature of the chaos narrative is the sense no-one is in control: agency lies nowhere as neither the storyteller nor the professionals from whom they seek help are able to solve the problem at hand.

The quest narrative represents illness as a journey through which something is to be gained. In quest narratives the storyteller ‘meets suffering head on’ and attempts to use it (Frank, 2013, p. 115). In these narratives the storyteller claims a strong sense of moral agency and represents themselves as the hero of their own story.

Researchers have drawn on Frank’s typology of illness narratives to examine personal stories of a range of illnesses (Ezzy, 2000b; France, Hunt, Dow, & Wyke, 2013; Nettleton, 2006; Smith, 2013; Smith & Sparkes, 2011; Thomas-

MacLean, 2004; Whitehead, 2006), as well as other traumatic experiences such as: job loss (Ezzy, 2000a), the 9/11 World Trade Centre attack (Hagedorn, 2004), caring for children who are ill or disabled (Bally et al., 2014; Jenks, 2005; Papathomas, Smith, & Lavalley, 2015), the death of a child (Titus & de Souza, 2011), and being bullied in the workplace (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2015). Although these studies address a range of experiences, common to them all is that they highlight the role of stories in dealing with ‘biographical disruption’ (Bury, 1982) or ‘some breach in the expected state of things—Aristotle’s *peripeteia*’ (Bruner, cited in Frank (2010) p. 28). In showing how people narrate such experiences, these studies demonstrate the complex interplay between personal experience and broader narrative templates which teach people how to be in the social world. As Bruner (1990, p. 51) states: ‘To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance.’

From this perspective, Frank’s typology provides a useful means of exploring issues of agency and moral identity in parents’ personal stories of reporting bullying to schools. A particular strength of this approach is that it allows the researcher to attend to nuances within individual stories, and to trace how these relate to broader cultural or master narratives. As Frank (2013, p. 76) has argued, the value of such a typology is not in categorising stories according to one narrative type or another but rather, in attending to the ‘mix and weave’ of different narrative threads within individual stories. According to Frank, ‘no actual telling conforms exclusively to any of the three narratives. Actual tellings combine all three, each perpetually interrupting the other two’ (Frank, 2013, p. 76). In this study I use Frank’s typology of restitution, chaos and quest narrative

types as a ‘listening device’ to explore how parents draw on broader cultural narratives to construct their personal stories of reporting bullying to schools.

Methods

The personal stories presented in this study derive from narrative research interviews I conducted with 18 parents of children in Years 5-8 in Tasmania, Australia, about their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school. In what follows, I outline the methods used to carry out this research including: key ethical considerations, selection and recruitment of participants, design and conduct of narrative interviews, transcription of interviews, and analysis and presentation of the data. I begin with a brief description of the setting for the research.

Research setting

The interviews for this study were conducted in the Hobart region of Tasmania, Australia. Tasmania is an island state located 240 km south of mainland Australia. It has a population of approximately 519, 000 people, almost half of whom live in the capital city of Hobart, with the remainder dispersed across the state in regional cities and rural areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a, 2016b). School students (from Prep to Year 12) currently account for 15.5 per cent of the state’s population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The vast majority of Tasmanian school students (70 per cent) attend government schools, with the remainder attending either Catholic or independent schools (19 and 11 per cent respectively) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The majority of schools in Tasmania are co-educational, with only a small number offering single-sex education. As elsewhere across Australia, government schools are non-

denominational while non-government schools generally have a religious affiliation. In the government sector, students attend their local primary school until the end of Year 6, after which they transition to secondary school, which comprises Years 7-10. A small number of 'district schools' provide classes from Kinder to Year 10. Following Year 10, students move to senior secondary school to complete Years 11 and 12. A number of Tasmanian schools in the non-government sector provide primary and secondary and senior secondary year levels, with some offering a middle school structure which generally includes Years 5-8.

Historically, a significant proportion of Tasmanians have not continued formal education or training beyond Year 10. Despite some recent increases in the percentage of Tasmanian young people completing Year 12 (from 47 per cent in 2013 to 51 per cent in 2015), the state remains well below the national average for Year 12 completion, which is 75 per cent (Productivity Commission, 2014, 2017). However, recent changes in legislation mean that from 2020 Tasmanian students will be required to continue with education and training until they are 18 years of age, or complete Year 12 or its equivalent, whichever comes first (Department of Education Tasmania, 2017). It is within this social and educational context that the interviews for the present study took place.

Ethical issues

Before starting any recruitment activities for the study, I sought and received approval from the full committee of the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference No: H0012883) (Appendix A). In this section I outline some key ethical issues which required detailed

consideration during the approval process, including limits on confidentiality and risks posed by the sensitive nature of the research.

School bullying is a sensitive topic which often evokes strong emotions. As discussed in Chapter 3, research attests to the sense of vulnerability many parents feel as they report incidents of bullying to schools. In the present study, it was likely that participants would feel concerned about potential negative consequences for their child if their participation in the study were known. Therefore, provisions to maintain confidentiality and protect the anonymity of participants and other people mentioned in the interviews (such as children, school staff and other parents) were of utmost importance. Throughout the study, anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of other identifying details in interview transcripts, research notes and all other written material arising from the research. In addition, participants were given written and verbal assurances that their child's school would not be informed of their participation in the study and information they provided would not be linked to their child's school at any stage.

As noted above, maintaining confidentiality was an important ethical commitment in this research. However, the potential for bullying to be related to acts which are criminal in nature meant that I was required to place some limits on assurances of confidentiality in the study. During the ethics approval process, members of the Human Research Ethics Committee raised concerns about the possibility that parents may disclose information about alleged criminal activity in relation to specific incidents of bullying, which I may then be legally obliged to report to government or court authorities. In order to minimise this risk, an information sheet advised potential participants of the limits of confidentiality in

the study (Appendix B). The information sheet explained that the focus of the study was on participants' experiences of reporting bullying to their child's school and not on specific incidents of bullying or individuals who may be perpetrators of bullying; and further, that participants in the study would be asked to refrain from identifying by name any alleged perpetrators of bullying. The information sheet also advised potential participants that if information about criminal activity which had not been reported to the relevant authorities was disclosed to me, I may be required to report such information. This advice was repeated in the consent forms for the study (Appendix C), and was also discussed with participants prior to signing the form at the time of the interviews.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic of school bullying, a key ethical concern was to minimise the risk of emotional harm to parents as a result of taking part in the study. As discussed previously, research indicates that parents who report bullying to schools often come away from these interactions feeling frustrated and angry (Harcourt et al., 2014). Based on these findings, as well as my personal experiences as the parent of a child who had been bullied, I anticipated that participants may experience strong emotions as they shared their stories with me during the interviews. From an ethical point of view, it was important that participants were fully aware that they were under no obligation to continue with the interview if it became too distressing for them, and that they be offered appropriate support should this occur. The information sheet and consent form advised participants that they may decline to answer any or all questions or ask that the interview cease at any time without explanation or consequence. Information sheets also included a referral to the Lifeline 24 hour telephone counselling service for participants to contact if they required support following

the interview. At the start of each interview I reminded participants that they may pause or discontinue the interview at any point. A second copy of the information sheet with the contact number for Lifeline was also made available to participants at the time of the interview.

Throughout the interviews I took care to monitor participants for signs of emotional distress, and to offer opportunities to pause or discontinue the interview if they wished. Although many of the parents did express strong emotions during the interviews, such as anger, sadness and regret, none became so distressed that they wished to discontinue the interview. Further, at no point during the interviews did I judge that any of the participants experienced a level of distress that was likely to cause them harm and would therefore require immediate cessation of the interview. A key component in managing this risk was the respectful and empathetic listening stance I took as parents shared their stories with me. As Hydén (2013) has argued, in researching sensitive topics, attention to the relational aspects of interviews is crucial. She suggests that in these circumstances the ‘ideal’ interviewer is ‘more a *listener* than a *questioner*’ (Hydén, 2013, p. 225). Such an approach aligns well with the narrative methods I used in this research which do not follow a standard question and answer format, but provide a space for participants to tell their stories in a manner and sequence of their own choosing, in as much or as little detail as they feel comfortable with. At the conclusion of the interviews a number of parents commented on their appreciation of the opportunity this relatively unstructured interview format had afforded them to tell their story in detail and to express how they felt about what they had experienced.

Another risk which required careful consideration was the possible negative impact that listening to parents' accounts of reporting bullying might have on my own emotional health and wellbeing. The potential for vicarious trauma is an important consideration in research relating to sensitive topics (Taylor, Bradbury-Jones, Breckenridge, Jones, & Herber, 2016). My personal experiences of reporting bullying meant that I needed to be especially mindful of this risk. It was possible that hearing parents' stories of these experiences would evoke painful memories and strong emotions for me. To prepare for this possibility, I met with a counsellor at the Student Counselling Service at the University of Tasmania to explain the project and my personal circumstances in case I should require counselling after any of the interviews. Throughout this phase of the research I was careful to schedule interviews to allow time for me to debrief with my supervisors and access further support at the University Counselling Service if necessary.

Although the stories parents shared with me were emotionally affecting, I found that I did not need to access any counselling services during this period. Regular debriefing with my supervisors provided me with an outlet to describe my experiences of the interviews and to stay focussed on the aims of the research. Certainly my personal experiences contributed to the empathy I felt for participants during the interviews. However, I am also an experienced qualitative research interviewer with well-developed skills in reflexive listening. When strong emotions arose for participants during the interviews, I was able to draw on these skills to support parents as they found words to express their emotions, or to allow for silences until they were ready to continue with their story. Rather than feeling distressed by what I heard in the interviews I felt humbled that these

parents had chosen to share their experiences with me so openly. I was inspired by their stories of deep love and determination and hoped I would be able to do justice to them in my interpretations of them.

Selection of participants

In keeping with qualitative approaches to research which aim to provide in-depth understandings of particular issues or experiences, participants for this study were sought using a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling which allows the researcher to construct a sample using selection criteria specifically designed to ensure that participants can provide information-rich examples of the issue or experience being investigated (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Patton, 2002; Rice & Ezzy, 1999). As Cohen et al. (2011, p. 157) explain, in this form of sampling the concern is not to represent the wider population but rather, ‘to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it’. At the same time, this strategy allows the researcher to include a range of relevant cases or experiences within the sample, thus enabling detailed exploration of social phenomena that are likely to be ‘complex, nuanced, situated and contextual’ (Mason, 2002, p. 125).

Accordingly, participants for this study were sought among parents whose children were currently in Years 5-8 at school and who had, at some time, reported bullying of their child to a school. These parameters ensured that participants could draw on personal experiences of direct relevance to the study while also allowing for a range of reporting experiences at primary and secondary school levels and across government, Catholic and independent school systems. In this study, the term ‘parent’ is understood to refer to biological, adoptive and step-parents as well as those acting in the role of guardian. Parents of children in

Years 5-8 were selected as the focus for this study because research indicates that upper primary school years and the period following transition from primary to secondary school, are peak times for students to experience bullying (Cross et al., 2009; Lester, Cross, Dooley, & Shaw, 2013; Rigby, 2010).

In order to take part in the study, parents needed to have reported bullying of their child to the child's current school, or to a previous school. For the purposes of the study, reports of bullying could range from informal conversations with a child's teacher to written complaints as part of a school's formal grievance procedure. The information sheet for the study defined bullying as 'behaviour where one person or a group deliberately and repeatedly set out to cause hurt, embarrassment or distress to another person' (Appendix B). However, in order to take part in the study parents were not required to verify that what their child had experienced met with the above definition of bullying. Rather, the key criterion for inclusion in the study was that the parent perceived that their child had been bullied and had reported this to their child's school. This privileging of parents' perceptions is consistent with the aim of the research to contribute to rich understandings of how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying.

As noted above, the sampling strategy for this study was designed to include a range of reporting experiences across different year levels and school systems. In addition, the study sought to include both positive and negative experiences of reporting bullying to schools. As outlined in Chapter 3, existing research in this area has focussed on the sense of powerlessness often felt by parents as they attempt to advocate with schools on behalf of their child. To date, the experiences of parents who have had positive interactions with schools when

reporting incidents of bullying have not received detailed attention in the research literature. In order to address this gap, recruitment materials for the study highlighted that I was interested to hear from parents who had been satisfied with the response they received from schools after reporting incidents of bullying as well as those who had less satisfactory experiences.

For practical reasons relating to travel to interviews, participants were sought in the Hobart region of Tasmania. While the majority of parents who took part in the study lived in suburban Hobart, eight participants lived in surrounding rural areas and commuted to Hobart for work or study. Of these, six had children who attended school in Hobart, while two had children who attended their local rural primary school. In addition, two participants had recently moved to Hobart from a rural area and told of their experiences reporting bullying to their former local school. This added a further layer of diversity to the study as participants had reported bullying to schools across a range of city, suburban and rural locations.

Number of participants

In qualitative studies which aim to provide detailed understandings of particular social phenomena, sample sizes are often kept relatively small to allow for the time consuming nature of generating and analysing rich qualitative data (Mason, 2002). As Robinson (2014, p. 29) explains, qualitative studies which aim to be idiographic rather than nomothetic or generalizable, ‘typically seek a sample size that is sufficiently small for individual cases to have a locatable voice within the study, and for an intensive analysis of each case to be conducted’. In terms of recommendations for narrative studies, Wells (2011, p. 20) suggests that a sample size of five is ‘sufficient for most studies involving complex analyses’. However,

depending on the purpose of the study, these practical considerations may need to be balanced against the need to include a sufficient range of relevant cases within the sample to enable the researcher to ‘make strategic and possibly cross-contextual comparisons, and hence build a well-founded argument’ (Mason, 2002 pp. 123-4).

Accordingly, in this study I aimed to interview between 15- 20 parents. I determined that this sample size would allow me to explore a range of reporting experiences as detailed above, while also ensuring that I would be able to attend to the particularities of each parent’s account of their experiences. The flexibility built into the size of the sample also allowed me to determine when the balance between practical and theoretical considerations had been reached. Based on the depth and breadth of the data which had been generated in my interviews with 18 parents, and as no further parents had come forward, I decided to stop recruiting participants for the study at that point.

Recruitment of participants

To locate potential participants, a public notice was placed in the Saturday edition of *The Mercury* newspaper which is published in Hobart with a circulation of approximately 61,000 (Appendix D). Copies of the notice were also placed on public noticeboards in libraries, shopping centres, cafes and health centres in city and suburban locations across Hobart. Parents who were interested in taking part in the study were invited to contact me by telephone or email for further information. A total of 28 parents responded to these notices, with all but one choosing to do so by email. In their responses parents commonly provided details of their child’s gender, current year level at school and a brief description of whether or not they had been satisfied with the response they received from their

child's school to their reports of bullying. In the few instances where parents did not volunteer this information, I checked it with them when following up by email or telephone. This allowed me to establish that potential participants met the selection criteria for the study and to monitor the range of reporting experiences included within the sample. One parent who contacted me about the study had a child who was not currently in Years 5-8, and therefore could not be included in the study. Following these initial contacts with potential participants, I emailed them an information sheet which explained the purpose of the study and what participation in it would involve, along with a consent form for the study (Appendices B and C). If, having read through this information, parents were willing to take part in the study, they were asked to contact me to arrange a mutually convenient time and place for an interview. Of the 27 parents who received this information, 17 agreed to be interviewed for the study and 10 did not respond. One parent who had agreed to take part in the study withdrew before being interviewed because she was moving interstate at short notice.

Prior to commencing the recruitment activities outlined above, I conducted pilot interviews with two parents who were recruited through supervision team contacts. Among these contacts, two parents indicated that they met the selection criteria for the study and were willing to be contacted by me with further information. These parents were then sent information sheets and consent forms and asked to telephone or email me if they were willing to be interviewed for the study. Consent forms were signed prior to the interviews and the parents reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

These interviews were initially envisaged as pilot interviews to allow me to see if my interview questions would elicit responses in the form of extended

stories. However, it transpired that both interviews produced extraordinarily rich narrative accounts which were formative in my thinking about how particular types of stories about parenting and bullying act in parents' lives. Both parents confirmed at the conclusion of the interview that they were willing for me to use the interviews in the study. I therefore decided to include the transcripts of these interviews in the overall data to be analysed for this research.

Participants

The 18 parents who agreed to be interviewed for this study are introduced in the following chapter through a series of vignettes. In keeping with narrative research methods, these are storied accounts which engage with the complexities of participants' experiences and do not attempt to reduce them to a set of categories for analysis (Riessman, 2008). However, Table 1, below, is helpful in providing an overview of how each participant met the selection criteria for the study and the range of reporting experiences that are represented within it. The participants are listed in the order in which they were interviewed, using the pseudonyms by which I have referred to them throughout the study. It is important to note that in this study I did not ask participants to provide demographic details such as their age, marital status, occupation, or level of education. This was because it is not my purpose here to provide an analysis of participants' experiences of reporting bullying based on categories such as these. In this study, these details were only considered meaningful if participants' included them as part of the narrative accounts they gave within the interviews.

Table 1: Participants by selection criteria and reporting experience

Pseudonym	Year level of child at time of interview	Gender of child	Type of school attended	Approximate duration of bullying	Reporting experience overall
Eve	6	Female	Government	2 years	Unsatisfactory
Jenny	8	Male	Government	3 months	Satisfactory
Martin	7	Female	Independent	2 years	Unsatisfactory
Teresa	6	Female	Catholic	2 years	Unsatisfactory
Louise	8	Female	Government	2 months	Satisfactory
Sara	6	Female	Independent	2 years	Mixed
Steve	6	Male	Catholic	2 months	Unsatisfactory
Charlotte	7	Male	Government	1 year	Mixed
Donna	5	Male	Government	2 years	Mixed
Marie	5	Male	Catholic	1 year	Unsatisfactory
Kate	5	Male	Home school (previously Independent)	3 months	Unsatisfactory
Amanda	6	Female	Government	1 year	Unsatisfactory
Jackie	5 7	Male Female	Government	7 months	Unsatisfactory
Gina	5	Male	Independent	3 years	Unsatisfactory
Lisa	5	Female	Independent	2 months	Satisfactory
Sally	7	Male	Independent	1 year	Unsatisfactory
Julia	7	Male	Government	6 months	Unsatisfactory
Kim	5	Female	Government	1 year	Unsatisfactory

Of the 18 parents who agreed to take part in the study, nine had reported bullying of a son, eight of a daughter and one of both a son and a daughter. At the time of the interview, seven of these children were in Year 5, five in Year 6, five in Year 7 and two were in Year 8. Ten of the children attended government schools, five attended independent schools and three attended Catholic schools. One child was being home-schooled after having been removed from an independent school due to bullying. The duration of the bullying the children experienced ranged between two months and three years. Participants gave accounts of a range of experiences of reporting bullying to their child's school. While 12 parents were dissatisfied with the response they received from their child's school, three were satisfied and three gave accounts of mixed experiences.

Narrative interviews

As discussed previously, the impetus for this research arose from the resonances I heard between parents' personal stories of reporting bullying to schools and a common stock of stories about parents and bullying which circulate in the public domain. In this study I wanted to explore these resonances further to understand how parents' personal stories about these experiences intersect with broad cultural narratives about the roles and responsibilities of parents. Thus, it was important to choose research methods which would allow me to conduct a detailed exploration of how parents narrate these experiences and the shared cultural resources they draw on to do so. Accordingly, the data for this research was generated through in-depth narrative interviews with parents about their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school.

Design of interviews

As Riessman (2008, p. 23) explains, in narrative interviewing ‘the goal is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements’. As such, narrative interviews do not follow a sequenced question and answer format. Rather, the interview is framed in such a way as to encourage participants to take the lead in detailing their experiences. Josselson (2013, p. 8) describes this process as akin to a dance in which the researcher is ‘*moving with* the participant and trying to ask as few questions as possible’. According to Riessman (2008, p. 24), this requires a significant change in thinking about the degree to which interviews are structured and controlled by the researcher, largely because the nature of storytelling is such that one story tends to lead to another. However, as Riessman further observes, it is when such shifts in the narrative occur that researchers need to be especially attentive to the meanings and associations that may connect one story to another: ‘If we want to learn about an experience in all its complexity, details count’ (Riessman, 2008, p. 24).

At the same time, researchers do need to retain some level of control over interview topics in order to maintain the focus of the research. According to Josselson (2013, p. xi), too much structure in an interview will restrict a participant’s responses so that ‘we are likely to learn “facts” but not meanings’ and too little structure runs the risk that the participant may talk ‘but not about what we are interested in’. She therefore advises that researchers make clear at the very start of an interview which particular aspects of the participant’s experiences are of interest for the purposes of the research (Josselson, 2013, p. 42).

With these considerations in mind, I devised an opening statement for the interviews (Appendix E), to outline the parameters for the research and the sorts

of experiences I was interested to hear about. Firstly, I reminded participants that the focus of the research was on parents and their experiences, and that it was not my purpose to collect details about specific incidents of bullying or individuals who may be perpetrators of bullying. Next, I explained that I was especially interested to hear parents' stories about how they found out that their child had been bullied at school, how they decided to report the bullying to the school, what that process had been like for them and how they found the responses they received from the school. Lastly, I explained that rather than following a set list of questions, the interview was an invitation to parents to tell their story of these experiences in whatever order and in as much detail as they wished.

My hope was that at that point participants would respond by beginning an extended account of how they came to report bullying of their child to a school. In case they did not, I prepared a set of questions on the topics outlined above (Appendix E). Josselson (2013) refers to these as 'auxiliary questions' or questions you have 'in your pocket' in case the topics you want to hear about are not covered in the participant's spontaneous account. These questions were framed narratively, in that they were designed to elicit details of actual experiences rather than opinions or generalisations (Chase, 2003).

Interviews

The interviews for this research were conducted between June and December 2013. With the exception of one interview, which was held at the participant's business premises, all of the interviews took place in meeting rooms at the University of Tasmania in Hobart. These meeting rooms provided mutually convenient and comfortable locations where it was possible to talk in private for

the duration of the interviews, which ranged between 45 minutes and just over two hours.

Prior to the interview all participants were sent an information sheet about the study and a consent form (Appendices B and C). I also brought spare copies of these to the interview, which I discussed with participants and answered any questions they had about their participation in the study. I reminded participants of the limits of confidentiality in the study regarding acts of bullying which may be criminal in nature, and asked that they refrain from referring to any alleged perpetrators of bullying by name during the interview. At this time, I also asked participants for permission to make an audio recording of the interview, which all agreed to. I reminded participants that, if they wished, they could receive a copy of the transcript to review. Only one participant chose to do this, and did not ask for any changes to be made to the transcript.

When these preliminaries were complete, I began the interview with the opening statement as described above. In most instances, while I was explaining the nature of the interview, parents indicated either verbally or with a gesture that they had understood what I was asking of them and that they were ready to begin. I was struck by how readily most of the parents began their accounts and was relieved that rather than thinking about what my next question should be, I could bring my full attention to actively listening as parents recounted their experiences. Numerous authors have highlighted the importance of active listening in qualitative research interviews (e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Josselson, 2013; Kvale, 2007; Wengraf, 2001). This is particularly so in narrative interviews where participants are encouraged to take extended turns at talking. As Josselson (2013, p. 66) explains:

The interviewing stance that will provide the richest narration is one of listening. Listening is active, not passive. We can think of ourselves as actively listening people into speech. As interviewers we try to maintain a stance of attentive, empathetic, non-judgemental listening in order to invite, even to engender talk.

Throughout the interviews I made every effort to listen in this way to create an environment in which parents felt that their story was being truly heard. As noted previously, close attention to the relational aspects of the interviews was a crucial part of managing the risk of emotional harm to participants in this study. From this perspective, the ability to listen with empathy and non-judgement was perhaps the most important skill I needed to bring to this research.

In the early stages of the interviews I asked very few questions so as not to interrupt the flow of parents' narratives (Wengraf, 2001). Most parents chose to begin their account by describing how they had first become aware that their child was being bullied. However, others chose to begin at another point in time, the significance of which only became clearer as their story unfolded. For example, some parents began their accounts with anecdotes about their child's early educational experiences, or the types of activities they liked to engage in outside of school. When they then began to tell me about the bullying their child had experienced, I saw that these anecdotes had been a way of foreshadowing what these parents thought were the reasons their child had become a target of bullying, or alternatively, why they were surprised that they had. Although there was no direct question about this in the interview, for a number of parents the causes of the bullying their child experienced became an important theme in their account. In this way, the relatively free-flowing structure of the interviews supported a deep exploration of the meanings that parents made of their experiences.

There came a point in each interview where parents indicated that they had come to the end of their story. Some signalled this with a short phrase such as, ‘so, that’s what happened’. Others did so by physically sitting back in their chairs and looking at me expectantly. I took this as my cue to begin what Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000, p. 61) refer to as the ‘questioning phase’ of narrative interviews when the main narration has come to a ‘natural end’ and ‘the attentive listening of the interviewer bears its fruits’. During this phase I used recursive questioning (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995), to invite parents to expand on what they had told me and to deepen their narrative accounts. At various points in the interviews I also reflected back to parents what I had understood about their experiences, which in turn prompted them to correct or elaborate on my interpretations of what they had said. These reflective interviewing techniques form a part of an analytical listening stance which Minichiello et al. (1995, p. 101) describe as enabling the researcher to ‘analyse what is happening at the same time as participating in the interaction and the discussion’. Further, it reflects a view of the interview data as jointly produced by the researcher and research participants (Josselson, 2013).

Given the sensitive nature of the stories parents shared with me during these interviews, I took care to close the interviews in a stepped way which allowed parents time to come out of the intimacy of the interview experience before returning to their day. When it seemed to me that parents had come to a point where there were no further aspects of their story that they wished to share with me, I asked them what advice they might offer other parents who were aware that their child had been bullied at school. This question commonly led to more general discussion about bullying in schools and how it could be addressed. At

this point, some parents also asked why I had chosen this particular topic for my research. I responded by briefly explaining that the impetus for the research had arisen from own experiences as the parent of a child who had been bullied at school. While I was willing to share this information with participants, I chose not to offer it at the outset of the interviews so that the focus of the interviews remained firmly on the participants and their personal experiences of reporting bullying. I then thanked parents for their participation in the study and brought the interview to a close.

Transcription of interviews

I transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews as soon as possible after each interview. This process allowed me to immerse myself in the details of each parent's story while also noting emerging patterns across the interviews as the study progressed. As Smith (2016, p. 215) explains, transcription is 'much more than a technical exercise' and provides an important opportunity for analytical thoughts to begin to 'percolate'. Indeed, Riessman (2008, p. 29) views transcription as a 'deeply interpretive process' because 'the "same" stretch of talk can be transcribed very differently depending on the investigator's theoretical perspective, methodological orientation and substantive interest'. As Josselson (2013, p. 126) also notes, 'the exactitude of transcription depends on what you intend to do with the data'.

Because the focus of analysis in this research is on the meanings participants make of their experiences it was important to transcribe the data verbatim, noting pauses and sounds such as laughter or sighs and using hyphens to indicate when speech was broken off abruptly. As well as transcribing the questions I asked of participants, I also transcribed all of my interruptions and

reflective statements. In this way I acknowledge the co-constructed nature of the narratives produced in these interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Josselson, 2013). However, because I did not intend to conduct a close linguistic or conversation analysis of the interviews, I excluded most of my ‘back-channel non-lexical expressions’ (such as ‘mm’ and ‘uh huh’) (Riessman, 2008, p. 31). Although such details help to display the conditions under which interview data are produced, they can also ‘slow up the reading of the text’ (Elliot, 2005, p. 51), and may serve to obscure the broader narrative features of the data which were a major focus of my analysis.

Data analysis

The interviews for this study produced a rich collection of stories about parents’ experiences of reporting bullying to schools. The stories were told in detail and covered complex social and emotional terrain. In keeping with dialogical approaches to research, a key concern in the analysis phase of the study was to engage with the data in ways which would allow the resonances in parents’ individual and collective stories to be heard. From this perspective, the purpose of analysis can be seen as bringing ‘diffuse voices into contact with each other, enabling each voice to be heard alongside other voices that expressed similar experiences, thus giving shape to what could become a dialogue’ (Frank, 2012, p. 36). This requires methods of analysis which retain a sense of each story as a whole, rather than fragmenting them across codes and categories (Elliot, 2005; Riessman, 2008). As Polkinghorne (1995, p. 11) explains, in narrative analysis understanding is gained through a process of analogy as ‘thought moves from case to case instead of case to generalization’.

However, as Smith (2016, p. 203) observes, embarking on a narrative analysis can be somewhat daunting because, in contrast to methods such as grounded theory or interpretive phenomenological analysis, there is a lack of ‘step-by-step’ instructions for how to go about it. This is particularly true in relation to dialogical narrative analysis, which Frank (2012) describes as proceeding on the basis of ‘phronesis’ or ‘practical wisdom’. Frank describes how, in this form of analysis, phronesis is practised through an ‘iterative process of hearing stories speak to the original research interest, then representing those stories in writing, revising story selections as the writing develops its arguments, and revising the writing as those stories require’ (Frank, 2012, p. 43). Thus, in dialogical approaches to research, analysis is not a matter of decoding data or gaining interpretive mastery over participants’ stories. Rather, the researcher enters into an ongoing dialogue with participants’ stories, retelling them in ‘varied form to create new connections’ (Frank, 2010, p. 105).

Accordingly, in this study I took a layered approach to analysis to allow for a deep engagement with the particularities of each parent’s story while also attending to connections and discontinuities across the stories as a whole. First, a re-telling of the stories through a series of vignettes focussed on key themes and events in each parents’ story. Next, I used Arthur Frank’s typology of restitution, chaos and quest narratives to guide a detailed re-telling of a selection of nine parents’ stories. Together these different layers of analysis produced rich interpretive accounts of how parents made sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools.

Vignettes

I began by listening to each interview several times, reading the transcripts closely and noting key phrases, events and recurrent themes in the data. Throughout this process I paid particular attention to the subject positions parents evoked for themselves and others in their stories (such as ‘problem parent’, ‘neurotic mother’, ‘victim’ or ‘bully’). Smith (2016, p. 216) describes this stage of analysis as a process of ‘indwelling’ in which empathy and understanding the data from the point of view of the participant are key. In addition, he cautions that in noting the thematic content of the data it is important not to break the text down to such an extent that ‘the researcher is left with a set of codes, not a story’ (Smith, 2016, p. 217).

Working from this perspective, I then wrote an interpretive account, or vignette, of each parents’ experiences based around the key themes and events I had noted in their interview transcript. This method of analysis aligns with Polkinghorne’s (1995, p. 15-16) view of ‘narrative analysis’ as a hermeneutic process in which data is synthesised in the form of a plot or a story, as distinct from ‘analysis of narratives’ which relies on separating data into its constituent parts. Further, as Frank (2012, p. 44) has argued, the process of writing is itself a form of analysis: ‘Decisions are constantly made about what belongs in this representation, what should be set aside for later and how the stories fit together – that’s analysis.’

In accordance with this, I found that the process of writing the vignettes was a crucial step in understanding the meaning that particular events held for parents in terms of their story as a whole, as well as alerting me to smaller, often contradictory, stories that lay within their overall account of their experiences. In

addition, the process of re-telling the stories, one after another, helped me to become attuned to common storylines and associated subject positions across the stories. Frank (2010, p. 37) explains this process in terms of resonance, arguing that ‘stories are textures of resonances’ and that it is through such resonances that stories build meaning. In order to recreate something of this experience, the vignettes are presented in the following chapter in the order in which the interviews were conducted.

Narrative types as a ‘listening device’

The next layer of analysis drew on Arthur Frank’s typology of illness narratives as a ‘listening device’ (Frank, 2013, p. 76), or interpretive guide, to explore how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying. As discussed previously, numerous researchers have drawn on Frank’s typology to understand how people make sense of illness and other disruptive experiences in their lives. As I wrote the vignettes I noted that parents often framed their stories in terms which were resonant of illness or trauma narratives. Many spoke of the bullying their child experienced as a breach in the expected trajectory of their child’s education, and reporting the bullying was represented as an attempt to remedy the situation. However, there was some variation in how parents positioned themselves in this scenario and the types of outcomes they described in terms of a resolution to the bullying. From this perspective, Frank’s typology provided a useful means of exploring the relationship between particular parenting identities and broader cultural narratives about parents and bullying. As Frank (2012, p. 46) argues, ‘typologies show how actors in whatever field are effected—enabled to be as they are—by their available narrative resources’.

According to Frank (2012, p. 43), in this form of analysis it is important to consider each story as whole. Thus, from the total number stories collected for a study, comparatively few are selected for focussed attention in the research report. Accordingly, an important step in this phase of the analysis was to select a smaller number of stories to be re-told through the lens of Frank's typology. Of the 18 parents' stories included in this study, I selected nine for this phase of the analysis: three for each of the three narrative types described by Frank. Following Frank (2012, p. 43), I selected those stories which spoke most strongly to my original research interest regarding the narrative construction of parenting identities in relation to school bullying.

Before returning to the interview transcripts I conducted a close reading of Frank's description of restitution, chaos and quest narratives in *The Wounded Storyteller* (2013). From this reading I noted the key features of each narrative type and used these to guide my interpretation and re-telling of the nine selected stories. Each narrative type is considered in a separate chapter which focusses on three stories which resonate with that particular narrative type. However, it is important to note that there is some fluidity in this as individual stories shift between different narrative types. Indeed, as discussed previously, the purpose of this phase of the analysis was not to categorise stories according to one narrative type or another. Rather, Frank's typology was used as a 'listening device' to encourage closer attention to the 'narrative flux that marks lived storytelling' (Frank, 2013, pp. 76-77). Thus, a major concern in this phase of the analysis was to highlight the different storylines at play in parents' accounts of their experiences, and to consider the implications this complexity has for how parents see themselves in their role as a parent.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the theoretical orientation of the study and the specific ‘storied resource’ perspective which underpins it. I have shown how each stage of the study has been informed by dialogical approaches to research which seek to engage with nuances and complexities in storied accounts of personal experience rather than reducing them to a set of codes and categories. In particular, I have argued that Arthur Frank’s typology of illness narratives provides a useful means of tracing nuances and complexities within and across parents’ personal stories of reporting bullying to schools. Further, in this chapter I have highlighted the important role that notions of resonance play in the design and structure of this study. By attending closely to resonances across parents’ personal stories and broader cultural narratives about parents and bullying, I aim to contribute to a rich understanding of how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools.

Chapter 5: Parents' Stories of Reporting Bullying

Introduction

This chapter presents a series of vignettes which derive from narrative interviews I conducted with parents for this research. The vignettes are interpretive accounts of the stories parents told during the interviews about their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school. Each vignette appears in the order in which the interview was conducted and focusses on key themes and events in that parent's story. In choosing to represent the interview data in this way, I am indebted to the work of Maple (2005), whose doctoral research on the experiences of parents whose young adult children had taken their own lives was formative in my thinking about the power of stories to explore connections between parents' personal experiences and broader cultural narratives.

The vignettes are placed here, at the heart of the thesis, in order to highlight their central importance to the substance and methodology of this research. As noted previously, it is such stories of personal experience which are largely absent from existing research on parents and school bullying. Taken together, the vignettes provide rich description of a range of reporting experiences. In addition, the chapter is designed to provide the reader with something of the experience of listening to each parent's story, one after another, and becoming attuned to the resonances at play across the stories as a whole. In this way, the chapter provides rich context for further layers of interpretation and analysis which are presented in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of the thesis.

Eve

Eve lives with her husband Simon and their three children in a small rural community in southern Tasmania. When I met with Eve, her daughter Jade was half way through Year 6 at their local government school. The family had moved to the area from interstate when Jade was in Year 3. In her account, Eve tells how Jade been bullied both prior to moving and ‘from day two’ at her current school in Tasmania. The bullying Jade experienced at both schools was mostly in the form of social exclusion, although on one occasion at her current school she had also been physically bullied. Eve tells how she had repeatedly brought the bullying to the attention of staff at both schools, only to be disappointed by how ineffective their responses seemed to be. At Jade’s current school the bullying had continued for more than two years. When the bullying escalated to a point where Jade was refusing to go to school, Eve met with the Principal to discuss the situation. She describes a heated exchange during which she threatened to report the bullying to the Department of Education if the school did not take more decisive action to protect Jade. Although the bullying subsided after this, Eve regrets how long she waited before taking such a strong stance with the school.

Eve began her account by noting that she too had been bullied at school. She tells how these experiences had made her reluctant to ‘step in’ and report the bullying that Jade was now experiencing in case she made things worse as she felt her own parents had done:

I think also in the back of my mind was the memory of when my parents had to step in when I was a child Jade’s age and having trouble, ironically enough the same age period. And I remember it failed miserably and made things so much worse. And there’s a fine line as to, you know, the best way

to, when you know your child is hating school and doesn't want to go. But of course, when it reaches the point where they – the distress on their, on her face, just to get out of bed and go. You know well, that this can't go on, and you know it's time to step in.

At several points in her account Eve expressed concerns about being seen as a 'problem parent' when she raised the issue of bullying with Jade's teachers. In Eve's view this situation was compounded by the fact that having only recently moved to the area she and her family were 'the new kids on the block' in a close knit community: 'We come to a new state to start a new life in this community; there's an element of you don't want to be the problem parent. Now that, be it right or wrong, was in my head.' However, as Jade became increasingly unhappy and withdrawn, Eve forced herself to raise the issue at the next parent-teacher meeting. She describes how uncomfortable this made her feel:

Oh, I hated it. I felt inside like, 'Oh I'm going to have to do this' and it was something, it was just something that had to be done. And it wasn't, you know, I wasn't um (sigh), proud of the fact that my daughter is being bullied, you know, 'Hey, let's do this in the parent-teacher interview!'

During this meeting Jades' teacher expressed surprise at the types of behaviours Eve was describing and promised that she would address the issue. She told Eve that she would try to observe what was going on between Jade and her classmates and from there try to turn the situation around. Eve tells how she left the meeting feeling happy that she had reported the bullying and was hopeful that now there was an 'awareness' of the situation things would improve.

However, Eve was extremely disappointed when the bullying continued, and as far as she could tell, the teachers were not seeing any of it. She decided to

spend more time in the playground herself to try to monitor the situation. Her distress increased as she could see ‘as clear as day’ what was going on between the children, but the teachers on duty did not seem to take any action. Further, she tells how this lack of action on the part of the teachers made her feel as though they did not believe that Jade as being bullied:

And it sort of made me feel as well like (sigh), you know, (sigh), ‘I’m telling the truth here. You know, like she’s really hurting, my child is really hurting and does not want to come to this school anymore.’

For Eve, one of the most upsetting aspects of her discussions with Jade’s teachers about the bullying was the way in which they cast Jade as the source of the problem. She tells how Jade’s teacher at her previous school had implied that the fault lay with Jade’s overly timid approach to joining games in the playground. At her current school also, Eve felt that the teachers’ response to her reports of bullying implied a criticism of Jade’s social skills, and in turn, of her own skills as a parent:

That’s what makes me want to cry - is you feel this, I must, it’s like we must be doing something wrong as parents. Or she must be not, um, - Why can’t she fit in with the other girls? Why can’t she? You know, I mean, she’s absolutely lovely, you know? Yeah, yeah, you do, there’s that problem there where you feel this inadequacy of not being normal and being able to conform because you’ve got this, you’re an outer, on the – you know, ‘Can I, can I play?’ type thing. Like you know not actively, and that, that, is the very uncomfortableness that I had with the teacher. That’s, that’s the crux of it. It’s hard to put into words but that’s what it is: There’s something wrong with *me*.

Eve tells how this pattern continued for more than two years until it came to the point where Jade was refusing to go to school. This posed a major dilemma for the family as the small rural school Jade was attending was the only one she could go to without having to travel a long distance. In order for Jade to change schools the whole family would need to relocate from an area they were otherwise very happy with. Eve decided that she now needed to take stronger action to sort the problem out and made an appointment to see the Principal.

Although Eve describes the Principal as having been very receptive to her concerns in their meeting, she was highly critical of the approach he then took with the children which she describes as being all ‘soft and fluffy’ with no specific consequences for their behaviour. She tells how following this meeting the bullying behaviours continued, culminating in a physical attack on Jade in the playground. Eve represents this incident as a major turning point in how she approached the school and describes her intense anger when she again met with the Principal, this time threatening to report the bullying to the Department of Education if he could not do more to put a stop to it:

So we said, ‘OK, this isn’t enough. Nuh, it’s not enough you know. We need something more, we need to see that something more is happening or I’m going’ – I basically said, ‘I’m going over your head, you know, I’ll talk to whoever I have to talk to.’

From Eve’s perspective it was this ultimatum which provided the catalyst for the Principal to take some effective action with regard to the bullying: ‘They didn’t get pro-active until I got pro-angry!’ She describes how, following that meeting, the Principal was out in the playground every day, watching the children and making his presence known. In Eve’s view this had the effect of putting a

stop to the bullying. Further, she tells how the Principal also implemented a ‘values’ program which she sees as having been helpful in creating an awareness in the students of the moral implications of their actions:

One thing that the Principal did which was fantastic is each month having a value. And the value being, you know, whether it be courage or respect or tolerance. Tolerance was a big one. And trying to teach the children, you know. And getting an awareness you know, of important values, to put the morals, to get them morally thinking.

Although Eve feels that by taking a more assertive stance with the school, she was finally able to bring about a resolution to the bullying that Jade was experiencing, she expresses strong regret that she had waited so long to do so, and offered the following advice for other parents whose children are bullied at school:

Don’t feel like it’s your fault. Don’t be embarrassed or feel uncomfortable about getting on top of it as soon as you can. Be proactive, be involved, and offer as much comfort to your child that you can.

Jenny

Jenny lives in Hobart with her partner Guy and their son Will. The bullying Jenny told me about took place during the previous year when Will had just begun Year 7 at a large government school. Will attended the school along with a small group of boys with whom he had been good friends at his local government primary school. With his friend Peter, Will had been among some ‘very bright boys’ in the primary school who had won several academic prizes. However, Jenny describes the transition to secondary school as ‘a hard one’ for these boys, testing their friendship and their sense of who they are in a larger school environment.

Soon after the start of the school year Jenny and Guy became aware that ‘things at school were not good for Will’. His friend Peter had started behaving differently towards him, saying nasty things and putting him down in front of other students. It wasn’t long before the behaviour spread to other boys in the class and then to soccer training after school. Although most of the bullying Will experienced took the form of verbal put-downs there were also a few occasions on which he was physically attacked. Jenny was surprised to find that Will was having trouble with his peers because he was ‘not one who was going to be antagonistic in any way towards other kids’. However, Will’s father, who had been bullied at school himself, saw that Will was likely to experience bullying due to his academic giftedness and relative lack of sporting prowess. Although Will ‘loves sport’ and is a keen participant, Jenny notes that ‘he is not particularly good at it’. In Jenny’s view the unequal value placed on sporting and academic successes in Australian culture at least partially explains why Will became a target for bullying. She interprets Peter’s change in behaviour toward Will as an attempt to fit in with these broad cultural values and to ‘be cool’ in his new school environment.

At first, Will wanted to see if he could handle the situation himself and didn’t want his parents to contact the school. A number of times during our interview Jenny stressed how important it was that she and Guy respected Will’s wishes and did not try to take control of the situation themselves. Rather, they did ‘lots of talking at home’ with Will about what was happening, trying to help him ‘work out how to deal with it’. However, by the end of the first term Will was feeling socially isolated and unsafe at school and had come to a point where he felt he needed some help to handle the situation.

Although he was still reluctant to report the behaviour to the school, Will thought it might help if he and Peter could have a talk in the company of their parents. Jenny felt that she knew Peter's parents well enough to contact them and invite them to try, as parents together, to help their sons work things out. However, Jenny was extremely hurt and disappointed when they refused to meet with her to talk about the situation. For Jenny, their refusal represented an approach to the issue of bullying which contrasted sharply with that taken by Guy and herself:

We tried talking to them and they didn't want to talk about it. They had a very different perspective on how to deal with the situation ...Um, because they had sort of taken an approach that you know, the boys need to sort it out. That this is 'just normal stuff, they need to sort it out'. And we thought, 'No, this is not normal stuff. This is not something that boys who are 13 years old can sort, 12 and 13 years old can sort out for themselves.' So we had a different perspective on it all. And um, we felt really isolated by that, you know?

In Jenny's view, to stand back and not intervene in bullying situations represents not only an abrogation of parental responsibility but also a failure of community. As she explained, 'We are all capable of doing hurtful and harmful things to other people. And to let it happen and not respond to it, becomes the thin edge.'

Feeling lonely and miserable during the school holidays, Will agreed that it was time to tell the school. Jenny contacted Will's Year Coordinator directly to outline her concerns and was immediately impressed by the clear position he took on the unacceptability of the behaviour and what he would do to intervene. She describes how supportive he was of Will, telling him that what had been

happening ‘is absolutely not on in this school, and we don’t tolerate this sort of behaviour and we really want it to stop’.

Over the next term the Year Coordinator met several times with the boys who had been bullying Will, to caution them about their behaviour and tell them what the consequences would be if it continued. Although the behaviour did not stop immediately, Jenny says that ‘eventually it all just settled down’. By the end of the second term things at school had improved markedly for Will: the bullying had stopped and he had made a new set of friends. Throughout this time Jenny was in regular contact with the Year Coordinator via email and face to face meetings. Although the process took some months, Jenny was reassured by how responsive the Year Coordinator was throughout that time, making himself available for meetings and ‘very much wanting to be on to it’.

At the same time, Jenny was impressed with the level of understanding the Year Coordinator brought to his interactions with the students around bullying issues. She describes his approach as one which, congruent with her own, is based on an ethos of community care. By way of example she describes how he invited a group of students, including Will, to meet and discuss ways they could help a boy who had physically attacked Will to change his behaviour:

He said, ‘We know that he’s having a hard time in his life, and I’m thinking that perhaps there are some boys in the class we can get together and say, look, these things are going on, what can we do to help him out?’... So it was very much taking a community approach. And saying, ‘You know, we’re all part of a community, things happen to members of our community at different times, and we need to get together and work out what’s the best way, what ideas do we have?’

Throughout her account Jenny advocates strongly for community approaches to bullying, which she contrasts with punishment approaches which she sees as a product of individualistic thinking:

There have to be consequences for bad behaviours, but it's for behaviours not for bad people. So it's really important to separate the behaviours from, the person... And I think it's working against our very individualist um, thinking in society, which is very unhelpful, very, very unhelpful. It's caused so much pain and suffering. And I think, with time, we are going to have to turn that round and become much more, communal, again. Because as people we need to support each other through life. And we need to know that we have people around us all the time who support each other in life. And, that um, if one person is struggling, then we as a community have a responsibility to help that person get through the struggles and out the other side, because it could be us.

The strong belief Jenny expresses in a community responsibility to help resolve bullying situations also lends poignancy to the hurt and disappointment she felt when Peter's parents refused to 'join with' her and Guy to help their sons talk things through:

That was very, very hard. And, oh Guy and I were very upset at times about all of that. We couldn't understand that we were being completely blocked in our attempts to try and resolve this. And um, oh, it was very painful for us.

Martin

Martin lives with his wife Frances and their daughter Angela in a small town not far from Hobart. At the time of our interview Angela was in Year 7 at an independent school which she had attended since moving from her local government school at the start of Year 5. In choosing to send Angela to a

different school, Martin and his wife had hoped to provide their highly gifted daughter with an educational environment which would better cater to her particular learning needs. However, although she excelled academically at her new school, over a period of two years Angela had become increasingly anxious about the way she was treated by her classmates. In his account Martin describes his concerns about the effects of ongoing relational bullying on Angela's mental health and expresses deep frustration at the school's lack of clear processes to deal with such situations. Despite numerous discussions with staff about the severity of his daughter's situation, Martin felt that his concerns were not being taken seriously and he could see no end to the bullying his daughter was experiencing at school.

Martin began his account by noting the long-standing nature of Angela's social difficulties which he described as an 'ongoing saga' since early primary school. He tells how during these years Angela was confused and upset by the fast-changing nature of friendship groups at school. Martin notes that, as a first time parent, he found it difficult to know if these experiences were normal for young girls or something he should be concerned about. However, as time went on, and he heard more details about specific events, Martin began to see what was happening in terms of bullying which he describes as 'an almost tribal gathering to persecute or zero in on a certain kind of person'. He recalls his own experiences of being bullied at school and observes that 'there is a type of kid that others will organise themselves instinctively to target'. In Martin's view, Angela was marked as socially different among her peers due to her high intelligence and being 'a little bit eccentric' in terms of her interests, and was therefore vulnerable as a target of bullying.

Martin tells how the family were able to ‘survive’ these early experiences of bullying by talking with Angela’s teachers who then arranged for ‘certain manoeuvres to keep the kids separately’. While these efforts did alleviate the situation for a time, it was increasingly clear to Martin that Angela was bored by the curriculum and needed academic extension to keep her engaged at school. At the beginning of Year 5, Martin and his wife enrolled Angela at an independent school which they hoped would provide her with the ‘brain food’ she needed as well as extra-curricular activities to support her various creative interests. Although Angela thrived at her new school academically, she found social relations even more difficult than at her previous school. Martin explains that the culture at the school was such that Angela’s ‘unusual’ interests were met by her peers with disdain and she was often ridiculed for her academic achievements:

We found that anything that happened that was unusual, like for instance, not going on a school camp or being interested in certain art forms or anything that wasn’t the sort of um, popular culture, kind of, she had to, ah she had to pay for...It’s horrible. Because we see her happiness and her engagement with homework for instance. She loves doing homework. So I get into it as well, we look up books, we go onto the internet, the whole thing – and then she comes home and says she has been laughed at because she did so well and ‘who cares about silly old Egyptian pharaohs’ or whatever it happens to be.

As she progressed through the school, Angela became increasingly anxious about her social standing with her peers. In particular, she found it difficult to cope with the unpredictability of cliques among her classmates and the way she could be ‘dropped’ by a close friend without warning. Martin tells how distressing these ‘turnabouts’ were for Angela and, by extension, for him and his

wife. Although they tried to counsel their daughter as best they could, they were both overwhelmed by the intensity of her responses to these experiences. They decided to seek help from a psychologist and Angela was subsequently diagnosed with anxiety and depression.

Throughout this period Martin and his wife made numerous attempts to speak with Angela's teachers about the harmful effects that her social relations at school were having on her mental health. However, each time they felt that their concerns were being dismissed as the teachers spoke glowingly about how well Angela was doing in her studies and assured them that socially there was nothing the matter that could not be solved with 'a little bit of encouragement' from her teachers. And yet, Angela continued to be highly distressed by her classmates' behaviour towards her. As her academic achievements grew, the hurtful comments from her classmates increased and so too did her sensitivity to them.

Eventually Martin went to see the Principal and arranged a formal meeting with key staff at the school as well as Angela's psychologist. Martin tells how he prepared very carefully for the meeting with a list of his concerns about Angela's experiences at school and questions about the school's policies and processes with regard to bullying. However, he was extremely dismayed when the Principal began by making a joke of his preparation and proceeded to chair the meeting in a manner he found both ineffectual and patronising:

He wanted to play the part of Chairman, or said that he wanted to play the part of Chairman, but in fact didn't. He let each issue fizzle away without resolution. And it seemed to be, to me, a sort of tactic to deal with, um, over intense parents. You know, 'let's let them' um what do you call it, 'let's let them unload'.

A particular source of frustration for Martin was the refusal of the Principal and other staff at the meeting to acknowledge that Angela was being bullied. He recalls how he was specifically directed by staff not to call the behaviour he had reported 'bullying'. Rather, the suggestion was that these kinds of interactions were normal among teenage girls and well catered for by the school's individualised approach to pastoral care. However, Martin insisted that the behaviour did qualify as bullying because it was targeted and repeated. He recalls how angry he became during the meeting and notes that, while he did not lose his temper, he was not as 'civil' as he felt he ought to be. Although Martin was grateful for the contribution of one teacher who undertook to 'keep an eye out' for Angela, he doubted that this alone would remedy the situation. With no acknowledgement of the bullying that Angela was experiencing, and no clear processes in place to deal with such behaviour, Martin could not see how the school would resolve the issue:

The issue of bullying, it's so difficult. It's so difficult to talk with the school about something that is occurring that's not allowed to have a label, and it not be just a sort of repetition over a protracted period of time of the same issues.

Following this meeting Martin felt that he had reached an impasse with the school where any attempt to pursue the matter further would only serve to entrench the view that he was an 'over-anxious parent' and would therefore be counter-productive. Further, he tells how his own feelings of anxiety in dealing with the school had compounded Angela's concerns about her situation. In Martin's view, the ineffective response he had received from the school in relation

to the bullying was responsible for the secondary trauma the family was now experiencing:

It makes us anxious and she picks up on that. And that that's one of the, I think that is one of the most iniquitous things about all this, is that the school in fact is responsible for, for um, the sort of symptoms of unhealthiness in the family, it goes into the family.

Despite his frustration with the school, Martin felt that Angela was too fragile to risk moving to yet another school where there could be no guarantee that the same thing would not happen again. In Martin's view, his family's only option was to deal with each new crisis as it arose and, with support from Angela's psychologist, to try to mitigate the harmful effects of her experiences at school.

Teresa

Teresa lives with her husband and three children in a town about an hour's drive out of Hobart. At the time of our interview, Teresa's daughter Caitlin was in Year 6 at a Catholic school in Hobart. The family had moved to the area the year before to enable the children to be within commuting distance of a school which continued on to secondary school, and so lessen the impact of their transition from primary to secondary school. When Teresa contacted me about the study she told me that she had 'documented eight months of contact' with her daughter's school regarding bullying, and that it had taken that amount of time for the school to do something 'proactive' about it. Throughout the interview Teresa referred to a spread sheet on which she had recorded incidents of bullying Caitlin had experienced as well as her own interactions with school staff about the bullying. For Teresa this strategy of methodically documenting events was

crucial to the way in which she managed the situation, to be able to remember what had happened and provide evidence of patterns in the behaviour which established it as bullying.

In her account, Teresa tells how the bullying Caitlin experienced was directed towards her by a classmate who was also new to the school. At first Teresa interpreted the behaviour as ‘a bit of shouldering, to compete with making friends with existing students at the school’. Teresa says she had expected some of this when Caitlin started at a new school. However, after a few months these incidents seemed to be occurring more frequently and had escalated to include social exclusion: ‘Talking behind hands, laughing and pointing, and getting children not to play with my daughter, and that sort of sneaky business.’ Caitlin loved her new school but was becoming anxious because, due to the behaviour of this particular girl, she never quite knew what each day would bring and whether or not she would have anyone to play with.

Teresa decided that the situation was ‘concerning enough’ to raise it with Caitlin’s teacher at a scheduled parent-teacher interview. The teacher responded that she had ‘no idea’ that this was happening, expressed concern for Caitlin and said that she would ‘keep an eye on the situation’. However, the behaviour continued on throughout the term at a somewhat lower level with ‘niggly things’ here and there. At the start of the next term Teresa realised that she needed to be ‘far more assertive with the school’ when she discovered that the girl had falsely accused Caitlin of stealing and had manipulated other children to support her claims:

So that was when I thought, ‘Right! Because one of the Ten Commandments is to not falsely bare witness.’ And I thought, ‘This is now, you know, undermining one of the commandments of Catholicism and these kids go to a Catholic school, so if they’re not going to address that, then I’ve got no hope in trying to have the school help with the issue.’ So I wrote a letter.

Teresa received a written response from Caitlin’s teacher, telling her that the situation had been investigated and found to be something of a misunderstanding. Teresa was dissatisfied with this and felt that the school had now also been manipulated by this girl. From this point on in her account Teresa referred to this girl as ‘the bully’.

Teresa tells how, by documenting the events, she had recognised that ‘the bully’ had established a pattern of modifying her behaviour each time she was spoken to, with things escalating again approximately one month later. Teresa goes on to describe how this pattern continued with the girl orchestrating a game on the school bus in which Caitlin was repeatedly hit on the head and shoulders. When Teresa heard about this she was ‘furious’ and wrote another letter, this time addressed to the Principal, and delivered it personally to the school. When she arrived at the school with the letter, Teresa found that the Principal was absent. However, she was able to meet with the Acting Principal who said that she was shocked by what had happened and would speak to all the children involved. Later that day Teresa received a phone call from the Acting Principal who told her that she had conducted a mediation session with the girls during which the other girl had admitted to hitting Caitlin on the bus and that the girl ‘should be commended for being honest’.

Teresa says she was ‘quite bemused’ by this and ‘very dismayed about how gentle an approach was taken with regards to a physical abuse instance that was admitted to’. She had hoped that there might be some consequences following on from the incident, and felt that the mediation attempted by the school was unlikely to send a strong enough message about the unacceptability of the behaviour. Teresa began to wonder if there was any point reporting further incidents to the school if no decisive action would be taken, and indeed if to do so might make things more difficult for Caitlin:

It got to the point of just, ‘What’s the point? This is just – I’m going to become one of those pain in the arse parents. They are going to dismiss me, they’re going to think I’m causing trouble.’ And I didn’t want that to have an effect on my daughter.

Throughout the year Caitlin had not shown any signs of school refusal. However, when the bullying on the bus continued on into the next year, she began to dread the journey to and from school and started crying in bed at night saying that she did not want to go to school. Teresa again raised the issue with the school, hoping to make further headway with Caitlin’s new teacher. She told the teacher that she was frustrated that no one at the school seemed to be seeing how this girl was behaving towards Caitlin, and asked if the teacher would quietly observe the interactions between the girls for a time so that the school might ‘finally recognise how this child is behaving’. The teacher agreed and said that she would follow up with Teresa in a fortnight’s time. However, the next day Teresa received an email from Caitlin’s teacher telling her that she had spoken with the Principal about the matter and Caitlin had been asked to diarise any incidents that occurred. Further,

Caitlin reported that her teacher had told her that the girl had been spoken to and that ‘hopefully everything would be alright now’.

Teresa says she was ‘just beside herself’ with anger when she heard this. She felt that the actions taken by the school completely defeated the purpose of her request to have the girl’s behaviour observed unobtrusively as the record she had kept showed that ‘whenever the bully has been spoken to her behaviour improves for only a period of time between two to four weeks averaging 20 days’. At this point Teresa surmised that the school would continue to deal with incidents in isolation not recognising that the behaviour was a case of sustained bullying. She was therefore surprised to receive a telephone call from the Principal the following day. During this call the Principal told Angela that she had spoken with the mother of the other girl and that both girls had been asked to report any incident straight away, and further, if their behaviour did not improve they would be excluded from certain extra-curricular activities that year. Teresa felt that this was unfair as it sounded as though Caitlin was being considered as ‘an instigator’ and was frustrated that the school did not seem to be taking account of the numerous occasions on which she had previously reported bullying of Caitlin by this particular girl.

Over the next few weeks the Principal met with both girls on a regular basis to discuss a range of complaints they each brought about the other’s behaviour. Teresa noted that these meetings seemed to have ‘a positive effect’ and by the middle of the year Caitlin reported that the girl was being ‘really nice now’. In Teresa’s view the bullying behaviour stopped because the Principal was now showing ‘an avid interest’ and ‘the bully now realises that she can’t move without it being seen’. However, Teresa says that it took ‘too many tries’ on her

part to get to that point, and is highly critical of the apparent lack of record keeping by the school in relation to her earlier reports of bullying and the way in which each of these incidents had been dealt with 'in isolation'. She takes credit for persisting with the issue and contrasts her approach with other parents who may have given up:

And I'm not going to go, I'm not going to um, like a lot of parents, go, 'Oh what's the point in saying anything because they'll do nothing.' I, I'm so opposite to that. I will keep doing something until something is done. In this instance, if I hadn't kept doing it, my daughter would be so mentally scarred by now, and her school work would have suffered incredibly...And in this case the teachers know that I'm not going to go away, um and they need to deal with the issue.

Louise

Louise lives with her daughter Charley in suburban Hobart. At the time of our interview Charley was in Year 8 at a large government school. When she contacted me about the study Louise said she had reported bullying to her daughter's school during the previous year and that the school had responded 'very positively'. The situation had been dealt with quickly and Louise was confident that Charley had not been the target of any further bullying.

Louise began her account by describing how the bullying had started during Charley's first few months in secondary school with some 'fairly low level stuff'. A small group of girls in Charley's Home Group had started 'behaving badly' towards Charley and some other girls in the class: 'You know, exclusion and giggling behind your hands and calling names, and you know, just generally being mean.' Louise says that she and Charley talked often about this group of

girls and their behaviour, but at first Charley was not particularly bothered by it. It seemed to Louise that Charley was coping with the situation by drawing on conversations they'd had when she was in primary school about why some children bully and different strategies for dealing with it. Louise sees these conversations as a means of protecting her daughter from the isolation she felt during her own childhood experiences of being bullied:

Um, and certainly we talk about things that I would never have talked about with my mother. Um, and part of the thing around bullying is, like I was bullied in both primary and high school but you were on your own then. Nobody did anything about it. And I was desperate for her not to have that same feeling of being totally on your own and not having any way of coping with it.

Although Louise felt that the support she provided had helped Charley to cope with the situation initially, she became more concerned when the behaviour seemed to go on for a long period of time and was also gradually escalating. She noticed that Charley had started to ask her not to drop her at school early, so that she didn't have to wait before the doors opened and there was supervision. Louise had begun to think that it was 'about time something was done' but Charley did not want her to report the bullying to the school because she was worried that it would make the situation worse. However, when Charley told her that the girls had used Facebook to spread nasty rumours about her and had also threatened to 'punch her in the face', Louise felt she had to 'step in' and decided to report the bullying to the school.

A key concern in Louise's account relates to how she, as a parent, judged the point at which she needed to contact the school. She suggests that, in making

these decisions, parents have to balance the development of resilience in their children with the need to protect them from harmful behaviours:

So you've got to make a judgement about – I mean because you can't rush in and fight every battle. There's a point at which they have to learn to get on with people, whatever. So someone being a bit mean, or whatever, is one end of the spectrum, but once, you know – and calling you names and stuff, it's kind of unpleasant, but it's kind of middling, but once they get to threats and spreading false rumours and all the rest of it, then you definitely have to step in.

Louise notes that in deciding if and when to report bullying, parents are also influenced by what they think the school's response is likely to be, and the fear that reporting the bullying may worsen the situation. In her case, Louise says that she was 'fairly confident' of getting 'some kind of positive response' from the school. She tells how this expectation was based on information all parents had received early on in the school year which explained that the school had a policy of 'zero tolerance' for bullying. As Louise told Charley when they discussed whether or not to report the bullying, 'Well you know the school says it doesn't tolerate this kind of behaviour, so you know, they have to take action.'

In the first instance, Louise tried to telephone Charley's Home Room teacher, who happened to be away on that day. She then emailed the Year Coordinator who responded the same day detailing how he had spoken that morning with the Assistant Principal, with Charley and then the two main perpetrators, and would later that day be contacting their parents 'to arrange meetings with them to discuss this disgusting behaviour'. Further, he said that if the girls continued to bully other students they may be forced to move classes.

Louise was happy with the swift response she received from the Year Coordinator and says that she and Charley felt ‘much relieved’ by what he had done. The bullying directed toward Charley stopped very quickly after that and Louise attributes this to the actions taken by the Year Coordinator:

It stopped after that. There weren’t any um incidents, you know, it stopped as a result of what he had done. Um, so I didn’t, I just thanked him and said that I didn’t need to talk to him anymore. I was, you know, glad he had taken action and something was being done. And that, you know, my daughter was feeling a lot happier about the situation, and I was, you know, prepared to just carry on.

Louise did not contact the school about the bullying again, but did have the opportunity to follow up with Charley’s Home Room teacher a few weeks later at their scheduled parent-teacher interview. Although he had been absent when Louise reported the bullying, Charley’s Home Room teacher was well aware of the situation and told Louise how he and other staff were continuing to work with the perpetrators of the bullying, ‘trying to make them understand their behaviour was unreasonable and so forth’.

Although Charley was no longer a target of bullying, Louise says there were still occasional ‘flare-ups’ of bullying situations in which Charley was sometimes involved on the periphery. However, for Louise, an important outcome of the school’s response to her report was that Charley now had confidence that the school would act on reports of bullying, and she was prepared to report any bullying on her own and other students’ behalf. Whereas previously Charley had worried that reporting it would make things worse, she and her friends now felt confident to use the school’s student reporting system if they

experienced or witnessed any bullying. With this knowledge, Louise felt she could 'step back again' and let the students and the school deal with any further incidents:

I haven't had to get involved again, because by the time I know it's happened, Charley said, 'Oh no, we've put in a Bullying and Harassment form about that already' ... They all know, all the students know, that if they're being harassed or bullied in any way, they can report it via this form. And obviously they know that action will then be taken. That they will be spoken to about what they said, and the others will be spoken to. So it's a sort of an alerting mechanism that they feel comfortable using and accessing. And um, that the school takes seriously, and actually acts on.

Sara

Sara lives with her daughter Grace in a rural area not far from Hobart. At the time of our interview Grace was in Year 6 at an independent school in Hobart. Sara was in the final stages of a long and difficult divorce settlement with Grace's father which had left her feeling exhausted and fragile. During our interview Sara described how Grace had been bullied throughout primary school, but that in the current school year there had been 'a complete turnaround' under the watch of a new teacher.

In Sara's view, the bullying Grace experienced at school stemmed from the 'overly strict' way in which she was treated by a particular teacher during early primary school. Sara is highly critical of this teacher's approach to classroom discipline and attributes the bullying that Grace experienced from her classmates to the shaming and exclusionary practices modelled by this teacher during their early years of school. Sara describes Grace as a child who is 'good as

gold’ and ‘doesn’t cause trouble’. However, due to some learning difficulties, Grace found it hard to focus in a busy classroom and was often distracted, laughing at other students who were ‘mucking about’. Sara says that rather than stopping to find out ‘who were the troublemakers’ or why Grace was having difficulty concentrating in class, the teacher ‘singled her out’ and often sent her to sit on the bench outside the staffroom while the rest of her class went off to play.

Further, Sara describes how the teacher failed to take account of Grace’s learning difficulties or family circumstances when Grace did not complete homework on time. She recalled a number of instances in which the teacher denigrated Grace in front of other students, characterising her as ‘a complainer’ who was just trying to get out of doing her work. Sara says that despite her efforts to explain Grace’s circumstances, the teacher persisted with her strict approach:

Well when I kept saying, ‘She’s not naughty. She doesn’t need to be sitting on the bench. You are excluding her from the other kids and you are making her feel bad when she has not been bad.’ ... She completely didn’t want to know about it. She said that, ‘Your child is making it up. Your child is just being oversensitive. Your child is just a whinger.’ All of this kind of stuff – not in those words, but that was the message that we got.

Sara tells how the children in Grace’s class teased and excluded her throughout primary school. She was often the butt of their jokes and was ‘left out of things all over the place’. In Sara’s view, the children were influenced in this by the behaviour they saw modelled by their teacher:

I personally feel that that teacher developed that culture in that group of kids. Because the parents are not mean people, they’re nice people. And the kids one on one, they’re nice kids. But I think as a group, that teacher has kind of

ah, not encouraged deliberately, but just the way that she singled some kids out, it had the other kids put them in that light.

It so happened that Grace had this same teacher again in Year 5, and Sara says if anything their relationship had worsened. Grace was also becoming more and more upset by bullying directed not only towards her, but also to other vulnerable students in the class. Sara decided to go and speak with the Principal about the situation. She says there was ‘a bit of an investigation, but it went nowhere’ because the teacher countered Sara’s complaints with her own interpretation of events:

I don’t see that that’s the Principal’s fault. I see that it’s the teacher doing the cover up. Because the teacher has been defensive, and just kind of brushed it all off like, ‘Oh, it’s nothing, the parent is just over-reacting’, or whatever.

Although Sara felt angry that she was being cast as an ‘over-reactive parent’, she says that she ‘gave up’ at that point and did not pursue the issue any further. She explains that the circumstances of her life at that time left her with very little capacity to advocate with the school on behalf of her daughter:

We were in survival mode. And I didn’t have a partner there to kind of talk to about things, and I was trying to get us out the door each day. That was an effort enough. And, you know, I was last in the food chain as far as taking care of myself. And just the whole court thing, it’s been a horrendous few years, it’s just been horrid. And so what we needed was a little bit of understanding, not more discipline, really. And um if someone is not listening, you just feel helpless. If your life is in turmoil, you just don’t have energy or headspace.

Sara felt that there was nothing she could do to change the situation beyond trying to bolster her daughter's self-esteem by engaging her in activities outside of school. She describes how Grace was able to make friends in this way with people who didn't have a pre-conceived view of her:

Outside things where um nobody knows her, they don't have a history of somebody putting her in a box, i.e. her teacher or other parents or other kids. There's no history, so they just take her as she is and they can see that she is worthy and valuable. I think it's almost like Chinese whispers that can get a child stuck in a box.

Later that year a relief teacher at the school observed some bullying in the class and reported it to the Principal. Sara felt somewhat vindicated that this teacher had confirmed what she had previously said about bullying in the class and that she was not 'just making it up'. However, the situation did not change significantly until the following year with the arrival of a new teacher whom Sara credits with a 'complete turnaround' in the situation. When Sara raised the issue of bullying with him at a parent-teacher interview she was much relieved by the way he 'took it on':

And this new teacher was very astute. He could see exactly what was going on. And when I said something to him, he immediately got on top of it. And he um, yeah basically it was just a complete turnaround. He addressed everything.

Sara was particularly impressed by the skilful way in which the new teacher handled social relationships in the class. Rather than issuing punishments for bullying, he worked 'behind the scenes in a very wholesome way' arranging roles and responsibilities within the class so that those students who had been

bullied were afforded more respect by their peers. He spoke generally with the class about bullying issues, and also arranged some meetings with the parents of children who had been either perpetrators or targets of bullying. Further, he facilitated more open communication about bullying at the school, encouraging the students to speak with him or the Principal if they felt themselves to be bullied, or if they had observed someone else being bullied. Sara notes that since the arrival of this new teacher, the Principal also seemed to be more available and actively engaged with helping students with these kinds of problems.

Along with these changes, Sara noted a major shift in Grace's attitude towards school. Instead of coming home and 'thumping down her bag, and then being all sulky' she now arrived with 'a smile on her face' and eager to talk about her lessons. For Sara, the difference in approach taken by the two teachers also had significant implications for the degree to which she felt she needed to be involved at the school. Whereas previously Sara felt she needed to advocate strongly on Grace's behalf, she now felt that she could simply monitor how Grace was and 'touch-base' with the teacher, trusting that he would handle any further issues if they arose:

I don't like to be on the teacher's case all the time, because I trust that they're, you know, doing the right thing. And I don't want to be seen as a, you know, pushy parent, who is pushing too much. I like to stand back and just let them do what they say they're going to do.

Steve

Steve lives with his wife and three children in suburban Hobart. At the time of our interview Steve's middle son, Brendan, was in Year 6 at their local Catholic primary school. Steve described how the year before he had contacted

the school about a group of boys who had bullied Brendan as well as a number of other children at the school. Although the bullying directed towards Brendan stopped soon after he reported it to the school, Steve was dissatisfied with the way the school handled the situation, in particular the lack of feedback from the school regarding the outcome of his complaint.

Steve tells how he and his wife had ‘picked up that things didn’t seem quite right’ with Brendan when they noticed a change in his demeanour at home. Normally ‘more reserved by nature’ than their other children, Brendan had become moody and irate and ‘flew off the handle very quickly’ with his siblings. However, he spoke quite openly with his parents about what was upsetting him: a group of five boys at school, who also played sport with him outside school, had been calling him names and on at least one occasion had also hurt him physically.

Initially Steve and his wife encouraged Brendan to fight back. Steve says that although Brendan is a ‘quietish sort of person’ he is also ‘prepared to stick up for himself’. He described how on the sporting field Brendan doesn’t just stand back: ‘He’s got guts. He’ll go in and have a go ... And this bullying, he was fighting back, he wasn’t just taking it.’ However, in this instance, Brendan found that fighting back wasn’t stopping the bullying. Steve and his wife then asked Brendan to write down all the things the boys had said and done to him. Steve says it was clear to them that they needed to document the behaviour ‘because we knew we would have to do something. It was not acceptable, what was happening’.

Steve and his wife then met with the Deputy Principal and showed her Brendan’s account of the bullying. She listened to what they had to say and then

told them that the school had a policy in place to investigate bullying situations: they would conduct a circle exercise in which the entire class would be asked to write down if they had experienced or witnessed any bullying. Steve was glad that the school was going to investigate but says that he felt uncomfortable just leaving it with them and wanted to know exactly what the school would do to stop the bullying: 'I didn't want to just leave it be or be like alright, I'd done with it, it's all finished now.'

During this period Steve also talked with other parents whose children had been bullied by this same group of boys. One of these parents had talked about confronting the parents of the boys himself, but Steve thought it best to 'give the school a chance'. A week went by before he heard back from the Deputy Principal who told him that the school had found that there were instances of bullying taking place and the perpetrators had been spoken to and told that their behaviour was unacceptable. Steve did not feel that this was sufficient and asked if the parents of the boys had been advised of their children's behaviour. When the Deputy Principal replied that they had not, Steve became angry and told her, 'If you can't stop it, you get rid of these kids.' Steve says his response was 'probably a bit over the top', but he feels strongly that the school and parents both need to be involved to solve the problem:

And if the parents don't know about it, I don't think the school will be adequately able to solve the problem, because the problem won't just exist in the school playground. They might be looking after the kids from 9 – 3, but certainly in the environment that we're in, it was in existence elsewhere because they all did sport together. Um, and, so I think you've got to work

together. And I felt that I was let down by the school. I felt that was what they should have done.

The bullying directed towards Brendan did stop after the boys had been spoken to by the school. However, Steve was concerned that the boys may have simply moved on to a new target, as they had done in the past, and the school had not actually stopped the bullying. In another conversation with the Deputy Principal, Steve pressed for further information about what the school had done to stop the bullying, but was told that due to privacy regulations they could not give him any more details. For Steve, not knowing the details of the school's process and what the outcomes had been was extremely frustrating:

I mean to hide behind privacy, um, I don't think that's appropriate. I think we've lodged a complaint and I can tell you we've never got satisfaction. I don't know if it's been solved or not, from being advised by the school...In a lot of other cases if you go to a complaints tribunal, they would investigate it and they would report back. And they would report back with an outcome. So you know all the way through – you might not know all the way through the process but you would get something at the end saying this is what happened, and this is the outcome and here's why. That hasn't happened.

Feeling dissatisfied with the lack of information from the school, Steve determined to do what he could to prevent the boys from any further bullying. He explains how, through his involvement in a sporting club outside school, he was able to arrange for the boys to be put in different teams: 'So I split them up, even though the issue had sort of gone away now. But I did what I could in my power.' At sporting events, Steve also took the opportunity to speak with two of the boys, indirectly letting them know that he was aware of the situation and that he was watching them carefully.

Further, Steve tells how, while watching a match together one day, the father of one of the boys asked him if he knew what had been going on with the boys at school. The father had suspected something was amiss, but had not heard anything from the school. Steve then, somewhat reluctantly, told him about his son's involvement in the bullying. However, when the father went to talk to the Deputy Principal about it he was told, 'No, there's no issues. There's nothing going on. Your son is not involved in anything.' The father then accused Steve of having lied, and after a few terse conversations, refused to have anything further to do with Steve. Steve was hurt and angered by this and says that by denying the situation, the school had cost him a friendship.

Although Steve says that without further information from the school he can't be sure what part he played in stopping the bullying, he feels as though he, and not the school, was responsible for solving the problem. Similarly, he says that the school may believe they solved the problem, having no idea of what actions he took. Steve sees the lack of communication and feedback provided by the school as indicative of an unwillingness to work in partnership with parents to solve bullying situations; a partnership he sees as crucial, given the way in which bullying 'spills over' from one context to another:

I felt that we should be working together on this. Whereas the school said they wanted to do it all, all themselves. And that's not how I would have liked to have seen it done, um because it's not just bullying when they are at school because they have these after school activities...And it spills over into that. So I would have liked to have jointly, and then jointly is keeping everybody informed about everything.

Charlotte

Charlotte lives with her three children in suburban Hobart. At the time of our interview Charlotte's eldest son, Luca, was in Year 7 at a large government high school and her younger children attended their local government primary school. The family had moved to Hobart from a rural area in southern Tasmania a few years beforehand when Luca was part way through Year 4 at the local government primary school. During our interview Charlotte told me about her experiences of reporting bullying at both primary schools her children had attended. In her account Charlotte draws a stark contrast between her experiences at the two schools and the vastly different ways in which staff responded to her concerns.

Charlotte had been planning to move to Hobart at the start of the next school year, but decided to 'speed up the move' when she became concerned about the safety of her children at the local school. Charlotte described how at that time the school had a 'high level of violence and aggression generally' and Luca was experiencing 'random acts of violence' on a daily basis:

It was that thing of every lunch time someone would come up and smash his lunch box out of his hands, or um walk all over his bag, or just walk up and punch him in the stomach. That kind of thing, like just randomly. Not saying anything, just walking up and punching him in the stomach and walking away.

For a while Charlotte did not know what was happening to Luca at school or why he was becoming upset and having angry outbursts at home. She had not had any communication from the school about Luca's involvement in any of these incidents and at the time Luca was 'not very talkative' and would not tell her what

the matter was. Finally, he broke down and told her, 'I'm just sick of people hurting me.' Charlotte says Luca felt 'swamped' by the culture of aggression in the school and powerless to do anything about it. Although she talked with him about reporting the behaviour to teachers, Luca countered that it was futile to do so because the teachers either 'don't listen' or told him not to 'make a big deal out of it'. Charlotte was concerned that there seemed to be 'no consequences' and 'no process that the teachers would take' to deal with these physical attacks. She was particularly disturbed that the school had not contacted her about any of these incidents. From Charlotte's perspective, this lack of communication made her job as a parent much more difficult as she struggled to understand Luca's mood changes at home.

These concerns came to a head when Charlotte and other parents heard via their children that there had been a 'lock-down' at the school with police called in after a student had become violent in the classroom. Charlotte describes how a group of parents met at the local café and were 'fuming' with anger about the ongoing violence in the school and the lack of communication from the school about this and other incidents. Several parents had removed their children from the school and a number were considering lodging complaints with the Department of Education.

Charlotte met with the Principal to express her concerns and to make some suggestions about 'keeping parents in the loop'. In her account of this meeting, Charlotte positions herself not as an 'angry parent' but as someone who sought to work in partnership with the school, bringing suggestions as to how improved communication with parents might help the school to deal with the problem:

You know, because I feel sometimes like kids like to think that their parents don't always know what's going on at the school. And so it works both ways, whether they are the victim or the bully, there is that sense of anonymity...And if the school doesn't have a good um, history of communicating with the parents, it just can, I don't know, it can just breed.

However, Charlotte was dismayed when the Principal rejected her suggestions, saying that it was not possible or desirable for the school to communicate with parents 'about every little incident'. Charlotte was disturbed by what she saw as a lack of accountability in the Principal's response and came away from the meeting feeling as though she had been 'dismissed' as 'just another angry parent getting in the way of them doing their job'. In Charlotte's view the meeting had been a 'waste of time' and she wondered, 'If an issue comes up again, what point is there going in to speak about it again?' Feeling that she had 'exhausted all possibilities for working with the school', Charlotte decided that rather than waiting until the end of the school year, she would move to Hobart and start the children at a new school as soon as possible.

Luca and his younger brother were immediately delighted with their new school, their first comments about it being that it was 'amazing' because the 'kids don't hit you'. Charlotte was also generally pleased with the children's new school and forged good relationships with the majority of her children's teachers. She goes on to describe how, almost two years after the move, she approached Luca's Year 6 teacher about some teasing Luca had been experiencing due to his long hair and 'slightly androgynous' appearance. She explains that from the time Luca began at his new school children commented on his hair and told him that he 'looked like a girl'. At first Luca 'didn't take it too personally' but 'over a year or

two, it just wore him down'. In Year 6 he asked Charlotte to cut his hair off because he was 'so sick of being teased'. Charlotte decided to go and speak with Luca's teacher about the teasing. Given her experiences at Luca's previous school, Charlotte was unsure how her concerns would be received, particularly as this behaviour seemed relatively minor in comparison to the physical attacks she had reported at the previous school.

At the same time, Charlotte was aware that another student in the class was being teased about being overweight. For Charlotte, the issue of concern was how students respond to difference, whether that difference be cultural, body type or, as in Luca's case, differences in gender appearance. Charlotte asked Luca's teacher what the school had in place for dealing with difference, beyond discussions of multiculturalism, and suggested that some broader discussion about the concept of difference should be included in the curriculum. Charlotte was impressed and relieved by the response she received from Luca's teacher who she says 'immediately warmed' to these ideas. He thanked her for raising the issue with him and told her it was 'perfect timing' because there was something coming up in the curriculum where he could work in some discussion of these issues. Charlotte was pleased with the outcome of the meeting and credits Luca's teacher, and the curriculum-based approach he took, with stopping the teasing:

Things just changed instantly. He stopped being hassled for his hair. And [Luca's teacher] he did it in such a way that it wasn't coming in and telling the students off. It was just bringing it into their curriculum, the programs that they already had in, and just taking into account that these little issues were coming up. And he thought that was really great. And was like, 'Oh thanks so much for the feedback.'

For Charlotte, a major difference between her experiences of reporting bullying at the two schools was the acknowledgement she received from Luca's Year 6 teacher for the part she played in raising the issue. In contrast to the feelings of futility and dejection Charlotte described after her meeting with the Principal at Luca's previous school, she felt buoyed by the tenor of this meeting and the role Luca's teacher afforded her as a respected partner in dealing with the issue at hand:

So it was that sense of, I felt really good about having come in. I didn't feel like I was being just a nagging parent making his job harder. I felt like it was um, you know, that there was a partnership there, and I'm really grateful for that feedback.

Further, Charlotte reflects that her experience of working collaboratively with Luca's teacher on this particular issue has had a positive influence on her ongoing relations with staff at the school:

So now I kind of go well if an issue comes up again, I feel really confident to come and talk about it, even if it isn't a bullying incident. Even if one of my kids is worrying about, you know, doesn't seem happy, you know: 'What's happening, got any thoughts?' I feel like there is more of a sense of collaboration with the teachers and the Principal, so yeah, it's good.

Donna

Donna lives in a rural area in southern Tasmania with her husband and two sons. At the time of our interview Donna's youngest son, Ben, was in Year 5 at a government primary school. Although the interview focussed mainly on Donna's experiences in relation to Ben, she also spoke about her earlier experiences of reporting bullying when her elder son was in primary school. Donna reflected on

her long association with Ben's school, the relationships she has forged with staff at the school, and the changes she has observed in an increasingly time-pressured and regulated school environment.

Donna and her family moved to Tasmania from interstate a few years before Ben was born. Her elder son had initially attended a small government primary school in their local area but moved to another school after experiencing two years of bullying. Donna describes how her son was often 'marked out' by children at the school for verbal and physical attacks, and by Year 2 he was having trouble eating and sleeping. She attributes this bullying to the 'very local, very old' culture that existed at the school at that time which was hostile towards people such as themselves who 'come swanning in from the mainland' with 'Greenie values'.

Donna's says that her attempts to talk with her son's teachers about the bullying 'did not work' and the Principal was openly hostile towards her when she decided to withdraw her son from the school. Donna and her husband decided to send their son to a larger government school which was further away from home but had a more diverse student body where they felt he might be able to 'fit in' more easily. It was a strategy which worked well and several years later when it was time for Ben to start school there was no question that he too should bypass the local school and travel to the larger primary school.

Over the past decade Donna has been very involved in the school, helping in the classroom and as a member of various committees. She tells how, through this activity, she has forged close relationships with teaching and administrative staff and also developed an understanding of 'how the school operates' and 'who

is in charge'. Donna sees this familiarity with the school and its workings as giving her an advantage when it comes to communicating with staff about any issues involving Ben:

I think tenure at the place has given me the ability to wander in and out as I please. Not wander in and out and say 'let's put the kettle on' or anything like that, but I do think that I understand the way the school operates. So you know that after school you can catch somebody for five minutes or whatever...I have a good relationship with the Assistant Principal...I'll see her in the playground and I can shoot off a sentence to her and she knows what I'm talking about. I don't think a lot of people have that advantage.

For Donna, having a good relationship with her children's teachers has been integral to her approach to dealing with instances of bullying. She describes how, in the past, she has actively sought information from teachers in order to 'open up a dialogue' about bullying situations. Donna sees the teachers as important allies in helping her children to understand 'the other side' of bullying situations and why other people behave as they do:

Because I don't think it's just about the kid that's being bullied. I think there's a learning experience for my child from that. Always, it's a learning opportunity. I want them to consider that there's factors why that person does that.

However, Donna has found that the success of this strategy is highly dependent on the skills and personal qualities of individual teachers. For example, she describes how Ben's Year 3 teacher, who was very experienced, was able to help him work through a situation in which he was being physically bullied by another child in the class:

So we could talk to the teacher. She talked to us about the other child and we came together with our son and talked to him about where he could go with this and what was happening in that other child's life that might make him do that, and how to understand. So the teacher was very, very progressive. Very old school, but very understanding of that child, my child, them coming together and working it out. So that was very helpful.

By contrast, Donna was disappointed with the lack of follow-up she received when she reported instances of relational bullying to Ben's Year 4 teacher who was new to the school, and in Donna's view, far less skilful than his previous teacher. Donna tells how, in talking with Ben, she recently discovered just how distressed he was by the relational bullying he experienced during that year and how little he trusted the teacher to help him in that situation. Donna observes that in recent years a number of older teachers at the school have retired, and new teaching staff often lack skills in classroom management and discipline. She attributes the lack of follow-up to her more recent reports of bullying to a lack of skills on the part of these less experienced teachers, but also to increasing demands on teachers' time in general:

I think now it's everyone's time poor. It's like catching up on what you need to do, it's like, 'Yeah, I know your son, no I will follow that up.' And then something else comes up or happens... So some of the practices behind the way that they operate seem to be a bit lacking. It's big and there's so much to do. I think things get lost in the ether.

Donna notes that as a result of the lack of follow-up to her recent reports of bullying, Ben now feels that there is no-one at the school he can go to if he feels he is being bullied. Without the kind of support she received from Ben's Year 3 teacher, Donna has also begun to question her own approach to bullying

situations, and wonders if she now needs to take a more ‘forceful’ approach with the school in advocating for her son:

The only thing that concerns me is that I hope I’m doing the right thing by talking to Ben about the other side of things. And helping him understand that there is not just his point of view, and I just don’t go up pointing my finger and going, ‘Listen here, this is what’s happening with my son, what the bleep are you going to do about this?’ There’s more to it than that.

K.H: So why do you wonder if that’s the right thing?

If I’m not, am I being forceful enough? Because there’s other people that, do go in and rant and rave. I’m not like that.

Marie

Marie lives with her two children in suburban Hobart. When we met, Marie’s eldest son, Sam, was in Year 5 at a large Catholic school which he had attended since kindergarten and her younger child was in Year 2 at the same school. Four weeks before our interview Marie had met with staff at the school to discuss some bullying of Sam which she had reported via the school’s formal reporting system. Marie was disappointed that she had not yet received any feedback from the school about what action had been taken as a result of that meeting. Although anti-bullying materials and activities are prominent at the school, Marie felt that there was a discrepancy between the ‘glossy’ posters and leaflets which urge parents to report bullying and the ineffective response she received from the school when she did so.

Marie described how Sam had been bullied at school for the past few years by a particular boy in his class who regularly made ‘derogatory comments’ and

‘belittled’ him in front of other children. Some of the comments concerned Sam’s sporting ability while others focussed on his difficulties with reading. Marie explained that at the end of Year 3 Sam had been assessed as dyslexic and was struggling to keep up in class. Although there had been ‘no major incident, just little bits along the way’, Marie observed that the cumulative effect of these jibes was such that Sam had become very self-conscious about the gap between himself and his classmates in terms of his learning.

For a time, Marie wondered if Sam was being over-sensitive: ‘Because for a while you sort of think oh, you know, is your child just being a bit, you know, soft? And do you need to teach them how to sort of toughen up a bit.’ Further, Marie observed that it was to be expected that children would have conflicts and the school would not want to ‘get involved in every bickering between children’. Rather than reporting the situation to the school, Marie attempted to counsel Sam herself, telling him that ‘there will always be people in life that you’ll come across and you’ve just got to sort of learn to ignore them and stay away from them’.

However, Sam began to refer to the boy as ‘my bully’ and Marie worried that the situation was exacerbating the lack of confidence he felt due to his learning difficulties. She did not think that the boy was necessarily a ‘nasty child’ but rather, someone who ‘talks before he thinks’. Marie raised the issue informally with Sam’s class teacher, hoping that the teacher might talk to the boy about the impact his behaviour was having on Sam. However, Marie says that ‘nothing happened’ as a result of this and the situation ‘just sort of kept progressing’.

When Sam came home from camp complaining that he had been placed in the same cabin as this boy, who then harassed him throughout the camp, Marie suspected that his teacher had not understood the problem. She raised the matter again and this time the teacher suggested that Sam should see the school counsellor to help him 'learn to deal with the way people respond to him, and the way he responds to what people say to him'. Marie agreed to this, conceding that Sam is 'quite a sensitive boy'. However, at the same time she was uneasy that rather than attempting to curb the behaviour of the boy who was doing the bullying, the teacher seemed to be focussing on Sam and his 'inability to cope with the situation'. As it happened, the counselling sessions did not eventuate because the counsellor did not have any time available.

Marie decided that she needed to take further action when she found a poem Sam had written about being bullied. She found the poem when she was cleaning out Sam's school bag and tells how distressing it was to read his description of what it was like to be bullied by this boy at school every day: 'And when I read it, I just, you know, had tears in my eyes.' When Marie asked Sam about the poem he told her that it was a class exercise. The children had been asked to pretend that they were a person who was being bullied, or the person who was doing the bullying, or someone who had witnessed bullying, and then write a poem from that person's perspective. Marie says that the children often engage in this kind of activity as part of the school's anti-bullying program: 'They talk a lot about bullying at the school and they do projects.' When she asked him about the poem, Sam told Marie that during that lesson he had told his teacher that he didn't need to pretend to know what it was like to be bullied, because he 'lived it every

day'. Marie was disturbed that the teacher had not talked further with Sam about how he was feeling or contacted her to discuss the matter.

I felt that I shouldn't have found this in his bag, and um, that perhaps if this was how he was feeling maybe the teacher might have taken the opportunity to talk to him about it. Or, you know, something like that.

At around the same time Marie heard more about the bullying from other children in the class, one of whom told her that he 'felt sorry for Sam' because of what this particular boy was doing to him. It was at that point that Marie decided she needed to make a written complaint to the school to put things on a more formal footing than her previous verbal reports. She did this through a dedicated school email address which she had seen advertised on posters at school. Marie describes how the school gives prominence to its anti-bullying activities, with 'lots of posters around the school' and 'a very glossy leaflet on their anti-bullying policy' which is 'proudly displayed' in the school office. She tells how, through these materials, students and parents are urged to report incidents of bullying to the school: 'It's all about reporting. There's lots of encouragement to report.'

Marie received a very prompt reply to her email from the school's pastoral care teacher who asked her to bring Sam to a meeting with herself and Sam's class teacher the next day. In Marie's view, the meeting was very badly handled and did little to reassure her or Sam that the school would prevent any further bullying. She describes how the meeting was a rushed affair, held in the classroom just before school, with children peering in through the windows as they waited to enter the classroom. For Sam, this was a highly embarrassing experience and he froze when the teachers pressed him for details of specific instances of the bullying. Marie was taken aback when Sam's class teacher

queried why she had chosen to use the reporting system rather than talk with her directly. She felt that even though the school had a specific system for reporting incidents of bullying, she was being asked to justify herself for using it.

In addition, Marie was frustrated by the tack the teachers took during the meeting, which again focussed on how Sam was responding to the bullying rather than what might be done to prevent it. Sam's teacher asked him if he had done what they had discussed in their bullying program in class about telling someone to 'stop' if you don't like what they are doing. Marie felt that this suggestion showed very little understanding of the power relations within bullying situations and was unlikely to be effective:

So um, I felt that the tactic they'd obviously gone through and taught the children was no, not at all useful for that. You know, I don't think um it did anything to empower the children that were being bullied to be able to stop that... You know, you're not going to highlight the fact that you feel bullied by somebody in front of, you know. And he said, he did say to his teacher that um, 'I have said that once'. And they said, 'Well, what did he say?' And he said, 'He puffed out his chest and said, "Make me!"'

Marie tried to explain to the teachers that their advice to Sam was unrealistic and would not help him stop the boy's behaviour. She told them that the situation was 'real' and what Sam needed was 'not to go and see the school counsellor, but to have the situation addressed'. At the conclusion of the meeting the pastoral care teacher promised that she would 'talk to the boy and make him realise what he was doing, and how he was making Sam feel'.

However, four weeks had passed since the meeting and neither Marie nor Sam had heard anything from the school about whether or not the boy had been

spoken to. For Marie this was particularly disappointing because there had been no reassurance for Sam that the bullying would stop, or that it had been ‘worth it’ for him to be ‘dragged in’ for a meeting and embarrassed in front of his class. Indeed, given that the boy had continued to tease and play pranks on him, it seemed to Sam that it had not been worth it. Marie felt let down by the school and the lack of follow-up she received following the meeting. She wondered about the value of reporting system that left things so unresolved: ‘It’s OK to report the bullying ... but it’s what happens to it. Once you do your bit, what happens then?’ Marie determined that if she did not hear back from the school soon she would contact them again and this time would ‘document everything’ to try and get some resolution for Sam. However, she said that she could understand why, out of frustration, parents sometimes took matters into their own hands:

You get to the point where you think, ‘Oh, they are not actually doing anything or not recognising it’ so you feel like you want to do it yourself....Sometimes I think gosh if I saw him in the car park by himself, I’d just want to go and you know, say, ‘Touch him again and I’m going to do you in, sort of thing.’ And you know, I don’t think that’s a good feeling for parents to have.

Kate

Kate lives with her husband and four children in Hobart. When she contacted me about the study Kate explained that she was currently home-schooling her children and that the impetus to do so had been a term of bullying her son Finn, who was now 11, had experienced when he was in Year 1. At that time, the family had just moved interstate where they decided to send the children to a small independent school. In her account, Kate describes how in the ten

weeks during which the children attended the school Finn was subjected to repeated instances of verbal and physical abuse by his classmates and the school had displayed an ‘appalling lack of pastoral care’ in response to her reports of these incidents. Despite numerous meetings with Finn’s teacher to discuss the situation, Kate received no assurance that the school would act to protect Finn from further bullying. After one term, Kate withdraw all her children from the school and began home-schooling them. The family has since relocated to Hobart, where Kate continues to home-school her children. She tells how, four years after they left the school, the emotional trauma the family suffered during that time continues to negatively affect how Finn relates to other children, and has also contributed to her own heightened sense of vigilance as a parent.

Kate began her account by describing the intense grief she felt on leaving a community where she had enjoyed close friendships with other parents and moving to an area where she did not know anyone. Try as she might, she could not seem to forge new friendships at her children’s school or in the broader community. Kate and her husband had decided to send their children to a small independent school in the hopes that it would replicate the strong sense of community they had valued at their children’s former school. However, from the very first, Kate felt unwelcome at the school. She describes a number of social occasions where no other parents spoke to her or tried to include her in any way. She was dismayed to discover that the teachers did not allow her to enter the classrooms, even to help settle her children on their first day. She recalls how she watched anxiously from a distance as her children lined up waiting to go into their respective classrooms. She was alarmed when a small boy came up and ‘body slammed Finn into the wall’ and the teacher did nothing in response: ‘She didn’t

miss a beat ... she just filed them into the classroom and that was the last I saw of him.'

Kate tells how this same boy, who was Finn's desk partner, proceeded to 'kick, pinch, bite and spit on' Finn. When he came home Finn was scratched, bruised and very distressed. Nothing of this was mentioned to Kate by Finn's teacher. When Kate raised it with her, the teacher explained that the boy did have a history of being aggressive and she had sat him next to Finn because his former desk partner 'really needed a break'. Kate recalls the anger she felt when the teacher gave her a 'rundown of [the child's] sad life story in the hope of engendering sympathy' for him:

When she made the plea for the sympathy, she detailed how violent and vicious he had been in the kindergarten and how his parents had been hopeless. And I was forced to sit there and listen to the story of his terrible life and his terrible parents, which I really didn't care about in all honesty: 'He's beaten the crap out of my kid, I didn't want to, don't try and evoke sympathy from me, you know, keep my kid away from him.'

In all the time that Finn was at the school he remained seated next to this boy who continued to act aggressively towards him. Further, Kate describes how soon after he had begun at the school Finn was physically attacked by a group of boys in the playground in a 'real Lord of the Flies' situation. Kate was appalled that the teachers on duty had failed to notice this taking place. When she reported the incident to the school she was told that the playground was 'grossly understaffed' and that it was sometimes difficult for teachers to see what was going on. Kate says that following her report of this incident the school made no attempt to 'sit the boys down and talk to them about how to behave in an inclusive

and kind way'. The only action the school took, that she was aware of, was to tell the children that they could no longer play in certain areas of the playground because 'Finn's mother had complained'.

Kate describes how, from this point on, even children who may have been inclined to befriend Finn now felt pressured not to. One child said within her hearing: 'Finn I really like you, but I can't play with you at school. I have to hate you like everyone else.' From there the behaviour 'extended up' through the other classes and Finn was regularly taunted by older children at the school. Kate says that it got to the point where she could not put Finn on the school bus or take him to places like the local swimming pool for fear of him being verbally abused.

In hindsight, Kate wonders why she didn't withdraw the children from the school after these first few weeks, but at the time she told herself, 'You can't judge a school on two weeks. Surely at some point it's going to get better.' Throughout this period Kate spoke frequently with Finn's teacher about the bullying but came to realise that the teacher did not know what to do to address the problem. She describes her disbelief when the teacher gave her a list of phone numbers for other parents in the class and suggested she call them to arrange 'play dates' for Finn in the hopes that this would help him to 'settle in' better:

So instead of talking to the school community, her idea was to give the new parent the phone numbers of the other parents and ask me to break into their community and cold call them, and ask them if their son's would play with my son.

Although Kate was very reluctant to contact other parents for 'play dates' she did approach parents of other children in the class to ask for their help with Finn's situation at school. She describes how she asked the mother of the

‘ringleader’ of the incident in the playground to try and persuade her son to use his influence to get the other boys to be more accepting of Finn. Kate says that she tried her best to ‘phrase it nicely’ but was met with suspicion and defensiveness and the conversation quickly deteriorated to one of accusation and counter-accusation. Kate came away from this interaction feeling extremely angry and frustrated that despite all her efforts to talk with teachers and parents at the school she was unable to protect Finn from further bullying:

I couldn’t as a parent from the outside. I was very helpless seeing, you know:
‘I’ve chosen to put my child into that pool. Oh look, that pool is full of sharks. And there’s a fence here that I can’t go in.’

She resolved then to remove her children from the school and ‘plunge into home-schooling’. At the end of the term she wrote a letter to the school citing the bullying that Finn had been subjected to and the school’s failure to respond appropriately as the reasons she was removing the children from the school. Kate did not receive any response to this letter until six months later when the letter was returned to her with a scribbled note at the bottom asking her to contact the school urgently to ‘discuss her issues’. Kate responded with a note stating that she was ‘no longer interested in resolving the school’s problems’ and did not wish to have any further contact with the school.

When I met with Kate she had been home-schooling the children for almost four years. Although she says Finn is ‘thriving’ with this form of education, she still sees the damage the bullying he experienced at such a young age has done to his confidence with other children. She says that he is ‘very leery in any big social situation’ and he is adamant that he will ‘never set foot in another school again’. Kate also sees that as a result of her experiences she is

‘very quick off the mark’ in relation to any social difficulties Finn has, and has to constantly check her responses to see if she is being ‘hyper vigilant’.

Throughout her account Kate expressed a great deal of anger towards the teachers, students and parents in the school community, anger she says she will carry with her ‘forever’. At the same time she says that she feels guilty for her own failure to protect her child:

And I’m just kind of like, he’s going to need therapy when he is an adult and I am going to pay for it because I feel so guilty for my um failure of discernment. I didn’t see the pitfalls before I sent him there. I didn’t pull him out after the first week. I made my little 6 then 7 year old son endure that kind of violence for ten weeks, which is a long time when you are a little child. And I will go to my grave feeling guilty about that. And so much rage. So angry at that school for accepting it, you know?

Amanda

Amanda lives with her daughter Freya in suburban Hobart. At the time of our interview, Freya was in Year 6 at a small government primary school.

Amanda had separated from Freya’s father when Freya was very young, and she and Freya had moved around a lot during Freya’s early years of school. Amanda described how, as a result of these experiences, she and Freya had become ‘very strongly bonded’ and at times it was difficult to maintain her role as ‘the grown up’ in the relationship. During our interview Amanda reflected on how difficult this made it to know how to respond as a parent when Freya was bullied at school. She describes her extreme frustration when, after struggling to convince Freya that they needed to report the bullying, she received no effective response from the school when she did so. After a disappointing meeting with the Principal,

Amanda took action herself by directly confronting a group of students who had been bullying Freya. Things improved slightly after this but the situation did not fully resolve until a new Principal, who took an active stance against bullying, came to the school.

Amanda began her account by explaining how the bullying her daughter had experienced at school over the past few years was part of a pattern whereby she would form friendships with small groups of girls and then find herself excluded and ridiculed. Amanda wondered if spending so much time in adult company had made it difficult for Freya to adjust to socialising with children at school. However, as Freya told her stories of how she was treated by her classmates, Amanda became convinced that the problem was not so much with Freya but with the types of behaviour amongst students that her teachers were prepared to accept. By way of example she described how, on one occasion, a child had pulled a chair out from underneath Freya, and the teacher responded by telling both girls to ‘stop bugging each other’ and get back on with their work. Amanda saw this as a betrayal of trust on the part of the teacher which put Freya in a very vulnerable position such that that her classmates saw that they could humiliate her in front of teachers ‘and get away with it’. As a teacher herself, Amanda found it difficult to understand how staff could witness this kind of behaviour without censuring it. She said that in her own classes her approach would be to draw attention to the unacceptability of the behaviour:

Not by humiliating them but by uncovering their behaviour in public. So if they’re going to do, pull out a chair in public from someone, then we can discuss that they pulled that chair out in front of the whole class. Because they were obviously feeling brave enough to do it so they can explain why

that's OK. And that's me not putting up with it in my class. Yeah, like I'm not providing a safe haven for this terrible behaviour. I will not have it around me.

Although Amanda had some clear ideas about how she would handle the situation as a teacher, as a parent she found it much harder to know what to do. Initially she advised Freya to tell the teachers what was happening, but Freya soon stopped doing this because she found that it caused the girls to 'get her back worse secretly or exclude her more'. When Amanda spoke with Freya's Year 4 teacher she felt that the teacher, although sympathetic, was at a loss as to what to do: 'She actually didn't know what to do with this group of sort of pre-teen, scary kind of, a lot of extreme and intense girls with extreme intense feelings.'

The situation continued to escalate and Amanda became increasingly concerned about her daughter's 'mental and emotional wellbeing'. Freya would often come home from school crying and Amanda missed days of work when Freya feigned illness to avoid school. Amanda and Freya had many 'harrowing' conversations during this period in which Freya would tell her mother about the same things happening over and over, but was unwilling to go to a teacher again. Amanda saw the situation as 'a kind of mini-illness' that was damaging her relationship with Freya as they argued about what the next step should be:

She would come home, she would be crying, she wouldn't want to go to school. I would say, 'Well I'm going to have to go in and talk to the Principal', and for some reason this became almost like a threat and my daughter would go, 'No, don't!' And I tried to talk it through with her and say, 'It's not a punishment for you, like I really need to do something. I'm your Mum, and it's breaking my heart hearing all this.'

Finally, Amanda made an appointment for Freya and herself to go and see the Principal. Amanda told the Principal that due to the bullying she was considering withdrawing Freya from the school. She was extremely disappointed with the Principal's response to this, which she describes as 'almost like a victim blaming thing'. The Principal told her that she and Freya were both 'valued members of the school community' and that she would 'hate to see them go', but gave no undertaking as to what the school would do to address the bullying. Instead, she put Freya 'back on the spot' and asked her what she thought would solve the problem. Amanda felt that the Principal was casting Freya as the source of the problem and 'really did not want to know' about the bullying. The meeting was over within fifteen minutes and Amanda was furious that the Principal had given them 'absolutely nothing' to help Freya. As she walked Freya to class she gave her a hug and told her that they just needed to 'get through the day' and then they could look at some other schools and talk about what to do from there.

When Freya put her bag in her locker she found a note and, after reading it, ran out of the classroom in tears. Amanda went after her and discovered that the note was an 'un-invitation' to a birthday party. In that moment, Amanda felt all the frustration of the past few months welling up and she rounded on a group of girls who she knew to be the main perpetrators of the bullying. Amanda was enraged but says that her training as a teacher helped her to keep all her words 'appropriate' as she detailed all of the unkind things the girls had said and done to Freya. She says that most of the girls were 'quite sweet in a way' and quickly 'owned up' to having treated Freya badly. However, one girl remained 'cocky and defiant' and 'wasn't softening at all'. Amanda describes the ensuing confrontation with this girl as a 'real human to human battle' and says that she

realised that if she didn't make this girl 'submit' then she was giving her 'the biggest advantage to decimate Freya' afterwards. So she kept on, saying all the things the girl had done until she 'wore her down' and the girl 'ended up sniffing a few tears out'.

Amanda she describes the sense of release she felt after this confrontation: 'It felt great! It felt like I'd surfed a wave. Honestly, I let this, this rage, this adult rage I had had in me, just swarming in me for months, I let every single bit of it out.' More than this, she felt that she had finally been able to do something to protect her child and this, to a degree, alleviated her guilt about not having taken action beforehand:

I was just as guilty as some of the other people, because I wasn't, I wasn't doing anything. This poor girl was coming home telling her one person that is supposed to make her safe, me and I didn't. There was a while I didn't protect her. And that makes me feel very, very emotional. But I did, thank God, sort of redeem myself so that I don't feel so terrible.

Although Amanda has some reservations about her actions on that day, and says that it wasn't her 'finest hour', she is convinced that confronting the girls directly, and making them accountable for their actions, did change things at school for Freya.

By the time of our interview in the middle of the next school year the bullying had stopped and Freya was now 'quite happy to go to school' and would tell her mother 'funny little stories' after school in a way she never would have in the previous year. Beyond her own actions, Amanda sees two main factors which contributed to this 'massive change'. Firstly, the main perpetrator of the bullying had moved on to a different school and this allowed Freya to make some better

social connections with girls in her class. Secondly, a new Principal had come to the school whose lack of tolerance towards bullying had changed the atmosphere of the whole school, confirming for Amanda's that, '90% of the time, adults just need to not accept it':

I had this very interesting conversation with Freya about a month ago, or maybe more, but she said, 'There's not as much bullying now'. And I realised at that moment, I looked at her and I realised we hadn't been under the same stress about bullying for ages, for a long time...And she said, 'The new Principal, he hates bullying.' And I thought, 'Wow, ever since this new Principal came there's been hardly any bullying at the school.' And it seems to me just that this man, this new Principal hates bullying, wants to talk about it, doesn't want it in the school, will not have it in the school. That's what she kept saying, 'It's just not allowed. It's just not OK, with him.'

Jackie

Jackie lives with her husband and two children in suburban Hobart. She also has an older son who is no longer at school and lives away from home. At the time of our interview, Jackie's daughter Hailey, was in Year 7 at a large government school and her younger son, Matt, was in Year 5 at their local government primary school. The family had moved from interstate to a rural area in southern Tasmania a few years beforehand, but had relocated to Hobart after just seven months. During our interview Jackie reflected on how in her years as a parent she had accumulated a great deal of experience with different schools and how they respond to bullying. She contrasts the largely positive experiences she had in relation to this when her elder son was at school interstate with the 'nightmare' she experienced at the small rural school Hayley and Matt had attended when the family first moved to Tasmania. She describes how her

attempts to report incidents of bullying to the school were met with a lack of concern which she found profoundly shocking, and which prompted the family's decision to move out of the area. Although the children have also encountered some instances of bullying at their new school, Jackie has been much happier with the response she has received from staff whenever she has contacted them about these issues.

Jackie began her account by recalling her elder son's experiences at school when the family lived interstate. In primary school he had encountered 'more exclusion than actual bullying' and Jackie was impressed by the skilful way in which the Principal had dealt with the issue. She explained how he supported vulnerable students by forming strong personal connections with them and was always 'open to new ideas' and ways of dealing with bullying. Equally, when her son was in secondary school, she was impressed by the strong stance staff took in relation to bullying and describes their approach as being 'right onto it'. At one point her son was placed on detention for some behaviour which Jackie did not think was intended to be hurtful, but she nonetheless was happy that the school had 'such strict disciplinary procedures'.

By contrast, Jackie has been greatly disappointed by the responses she has received from a number of schools when she has raised concerns about bullying in relation to her two younger children. In Jackie's view, there is a clear division between schools that are 'accountable' for bullying and those that are not; and she has twice removed Hayley and Matt from schools which she believed had a poor response to bullying. She tells how, prior to moving to Tasmania, she removed the children from their local government primary school after Matt was physically bullied and the Principal failed to discipline the children involved. When Jackie

complained to the Principal about the children's behaviour, he told her: 'Oh no, they're good kids' and did not take any further action. In Jackie's view, the Principal's response demonstrated a lack of accountability which placed her children in a vulnerable position and she states adamantly, 'I just won't put my children in that situation.'

Following this incident Jackie decided to send the children to an independent school which she hoped would provide a stronger set of values to guide students' behaviour. In particular, Jackie was impressed by the sense of community at the school and the congruence between the values promoted by the school and those held by parents. Jackie explained that in this environment raising children was seen as a responsibility shared across the community and she placed great value on the support she received from other parents in the school community.

When the family decided to move to Tasmania, they chose to live in a rural area in the hopes that they could continue to be part of a community where 'everyone knows everyone' and adults look out for other people's children. Jackie had researched the school on the internet and it seemed to offer the strong sense of community in a beautiful environment that she was looking for. However, Jackie was dismayed when, soon after starting at the school, both children encountered bullying. Jackie describes how Matt was 'physically and verbally abused' at school and Hayley was repeatedly called derogatory names which were 'very insulting to women'. Jackie was deeply concerned by this behaviour and reported the incidents to the school straightaway. However, she was shocked by the 'flippant' response she received from the teachers, who did not seem to think that the behaviour 'warranted any form of discipline or worry'.

She then met with the Principal who expressed surprise that she was so concerned about the verbal abuse her daughter was experiencing:

I was just in the room, like you know this kind of room in the Principal's office and um he seriously was looking at me as though, 'Why have you got a problem with this?'... And he couldn't understand why I had a problem with my daughter being called certain names, which I thought was just you know, I got really angry because my daughter shouldn't have to be subjected to that. And his response was, 'But this is a good kid' and I'm like (laughter), 'I don't call that a good child!' And [he said] also, 'Oh, but there's ones that are worse.' And I'm like, 'But that doesn't justify a thing.'

Because she had not received a good response from the school Jackie decided to speak directly with the mother of the girl who had been abusing Hayley. She explains that if Hayley had been behaving in that way she would want to know so that she could talk to her about it and take her to apologise to the child and their family. However, Jackie was astounded when the girl's mother did not seem to be at all perturbed by her daughter's behaviour and 'just stood there as though it were a normal kind of experience'. Jackie was particularly disappointed by this because prior to moving to the area she had been told that 'the community was good and supportive'. However, she was shocked by the lack of concern about children's 'bad behaviour' which she encountered both within the school and the broader community.

After having her concerns dismissed in this way, Jackie began to question her own judgement. She wondered if, in raising these concerns, she was being 'hyper-sensitive':

But they couldn't understand why that was such a big thing to me. And I'm thinking, I did start questioning my own sensibility. You know, they didn't think there was a problem with my daughter and I was like, really shocked about that. And then with my son, I'm thinking, 'Is it me?' You know, 'Have I lost something in the transition from the mainland to here? Am I hyper-sensitive, or what is it?' And it really um, it actually did send me quite into a, a stupor, kind of thing.

She also began to wonder if her children might have been 'exaggerating' the other children's behaviour. She decided to spend time volunteering at the school so that she could gauge the situation for herself and, if need be, 'protect' her children:

I like volunteering in schools because you really see what's going on. And especially at that school, I really wanted to, if my children had an excursion I wanted to be part of it so I could protect them.

However, the more time Jackie spent at the school the more anxious she became as she saw 'more of what happens and what's not being done about it'. She considered home-schooling the children but decided that she did not have the capacity to do so. She did not know what she could do to protect the children from further bullying and describes how powerless she felt in this situation:

But just every day I would walk to the school and the anxiety would just rise and rise and rise. Because I knew when I got to school there'd be, 'Blah, blah, blah, this happened' you know? And you'd be like, 'What do I do?' I can't, mentally, have them at home because it was just too much for me in a new place and with my own stuff it was way too much. And I knew it would push me over the edge, having them there. And I'm like, 'What am I going to do with them? What?' And so your whole sense of a parent, of a person, and everything, is questioned because you feel so powerless. You really do.

After seven months, the family relocated to suburban Hobart where the children attended the local government primary and secondary schools. For Jackie the move brought enormous relief in that any concerns she raised with staff at the children's new schools had been met with immediate and helpful responses. However, the family is still dealing with the ramifications of their experiences at the children's former school and Jackie continually monitors how these experiences may be influencing the children's current school experiences and how they respond to difficulties with their peers.

Gina

Gina lives with her husband and two sons in suburban Hobart. At the time of our interview, Gina's son, Liam, was in Year 5 at an independent school which he had attended since Year 3. Gina and her husband had chosen to send their children to the school after removing their elder son from another school due to bullying. Although the new school had been a great success for their elder son, Liam had experienced persistent problems with bullying for almost three years. During our interview Gina described her experiences of reporting bullying to both of these schools and told how both had handled the situation badly. At her elder son's previous school, staff had intervened in the bullying but had significantly worsened the situation. At the children's current school, staff repeatedly failed to act on Gina's reports of the bullying, and only did so after she reported an incident to the police.

Gina began her account by describing how her elder son had been bullied when he started Year 7 at a Catholic school. A boy on the bus had taken to harassing him while his classmates looked on and did nothing. The behaviour

soon spread to other boys at the school and Gina's son was often the victim of practical jokes, having his locker tampered with and his uniform 'wrecked'.

Gina's husband made several complaints to the school by phone and letter, before receiving a phone call from the school's pastoral care teacher who asked to come and meet with the family at their home. The teacher asked Gina's son to write down a list of all the boys who had bullied him and exactly what they had done.

Gina and her husband were worried about how this information might be used but the teacher assured them that he had many years of experience of dealing with this type of behaviour and told them, 'I'll stamp it out. It'll be fine. No problem.'

They were, then, very upset to learn that the teacher had shown the list to several boys at the school. In Gina's view, far from solving the problem, this caused the bullying to escalate as their son was now branded as a 'dobber'.

Gina and her husband became very concerned about their son's physical and mental health. Within the space of one term he had gone from an 'easy going kid' who had 'never gotten into trouble, never been a victim of bullying before' to one who was highly anxious about school, could not sleep and had lost a lot of weight. On the first day of the new school term he rang Gina in tears and asked her to come and get him because he could not 'fight every kid in the school'.

Gina and her husband decided that they needed to withdraw him from the school without delay. They quickly found a place for him at an independent school where, in the years since, he has done very well both socially and academically. On the strength of this, Gina and her husband decided that Liam should also attend this school.

However, Liam's experiences at the school were very different to those of his elder brother. Gina describes how from the time he started at the school he

was 'pushed, shoved and called names' by a boy in the class above him. When Liam told the teachers what was happening, he was told that they would 'look into it' but nothing came of this and the behaviour continued on and off over a period of three years. Liam had long since decided that there was no point in reporting the behaviour to his teachers since, as he told Gina, 'They do nothing'.

The behaviour had escalated in the current school year and Gina tells how she had raised the issue with Liam's teacher a number of times but was dissatisfied with the response she received. Although the teacher acknowledged that the boy could be 'rough' she did not seem to recognise the behaviour as bullying since she did not see it as specifically targeted towards Liam. Rather, she suggested that Liam was over-reacting, and told Gina, 'I think your son can be a bit of a drama queen sometimes'. The situation had come to a head a few weeks before our interview when Liam had been physically injured by the boy. Liam told his teacher what had happened straight away and she had replied, 'Oh, I will talk to you about it later, I'm too busy now'. Later in the day the teacher asked Liam about his injury which, by that time, had become extremely red and sore. Liam again told her what had happened and she again told him that she would talk to him about it later. By the end of the day the teacher had not talked any further with him about what had happened. When Gina picked Liam up from school he was hurt and frightened and would only tell his mother what had happened once they were in the car and on their way home. Gina was angry that the teacher who 'knew the history of the bullying' and was 'abundantly aware' of what had happened that day was either 'too busy or she did nothing'.

When Gina spoke with her husband that night they agreed that what had happened to Liam that day constituted 'common assault' and the situation had

now ‘crossed the line.’ They decided to report the incident to the police and later that night a police officer came to their house to take a statement. Gina explained that their intention in this was not to actually press charges but to get the school to take the situation seriously. As she told the police officer:

We don’t want the offender prosecuted. We don’t want to have to go and give evidence in court. But basically where we are with the school, we need the um, we need to show them that this is far more serious and what’s happened. And they’re not doing anything. They either don’t recognise that it is a serious or it’s a habitual problem. So we need to show them that it is. Um and how we’re showing them is that we’re reporting it to you.

Gina’s husband then contacted the Principal to let him know that they had reported the incident to the police, but that they were still considering whether or not they would press charges. Gina says that from that point, the school began to take action. The next day the Principal spoke with Liam and apologised for what had happened and for the fact that the teacher ‘didn’t take notice and didn’t recognise that it was a serious issue’. The boy was asked to apologise to Liam and was placed on an internal suspension, meaning that he was allowed to come to school but not take part in any group activities. The Principal telephoned Gina to let her know about the internal suspension and also that he had spoken with the boy’s mother and would be working with her to prevent further incidents.

Although Gina was sceptical that these actions would be enough to stop the boy’s ‘habitual’ behaviour, she said that over the past weeks things had been ‘much better’. There had been no more incidents and Liam said that they had been ‘getting on’ and playing handball together before school without any problems. However, Gina was convinced that the school had only intervened

because she and her husband had contacted the police. She determined that in future she would take a much more proactive role in monitoring the situation in case she needed to 'get the ball rolling again'. Further, she describes how she had taken a more direct approach with Liam's teacher, clearly telling her what she expected from her in relation to any future reports of bullying:

I said, 'Alright, I just want to make sure that you know, if he says something to you, you have to investigate it. You can't just you know, let it slide. He may be a drama queen but your job is, you may think he's a drama queen, but your job is to um weed out what's happening and you know, like what's real and what's not, sort of thing.' So I was happy that I had spoken to her again to say basically, you know, 'I'm still checking. I'm not letting it, I'm not letting it stop.'

Lisa

Lisa lives with her partner and two children in a small town just out of Hobart. At the time of our interview, Lisa's daughter Jessie was in Year 5 at an independent school in Hobart. Jessie had previously attended the local government school along with her younger sibling, but had changed schools at the start of Year 5. Lisa initially contacted me about her experience of reporting bullying at Jessie's current school, but during the interview recalled that she had also reported bullying to the local government school when Jessie was in Year 3.

Although Lisa says that the reasons Jessie left her previous school were not related to bullying, she describes these two experiences as 'contrasting stories'. While the bullying Jessie experienced at the local government school did dissipate over time, Lisa did not think that this was due to any action taken by the school. She compares the lack of follow up she received from the local government

school with the comprehensive response she received from Jessie's current school, where the bullying she reported was dealt with 'quickly and well'. In Lisa's view, the close communication the school maintained with her throughout this process was in keeping with the school's generally high level of responsiveness to parent concerns.

The bullying Jessie encountered at her local government school involved a particular child whom she had complained about on and off for a few years. Initially, Lisa did not raise the issue with the school because she did not think that the behaviour was particularly serious or directly targeted at Jessie: 'It's not like she was pushing Jessie around, or doing anything like that. She was more one of those kids that kind of niggle, niggle, niggle, constant stuff.' However, by Year 3 Jessie was sufficiently bothered by the child's behaviour to ask her mother to get the teacher to facilitate a 'mediated session' between herself and the other child. The teacher agreed to this and the children were able to come to an agreement about what behaviours were not acceptable. However, Lisa says that following this session she received 'no follow up at all' from the school and 'nothing changed really'. Rather than pursue the matter further with the school, she counselled Jessie to ignore and avoid the child as much as possible. This strategy seemed to help and the situation 'never really hotted up'. The next year the children were in different classes and this alleviated the situation for Jessie somewhat as 'she only had to deal with it at lunchtime'. On reflection, Lisa says that she now feels 'a bit guilty' that she 'let it slip' and did not pursue the matter further with the school:

Because I didn't pursue it, so obviously it wasn't a massive deal for us. But on the other hand, if it had been pursued a bit more – you wonder, you know,

like Jessie was pretty proactive with all of that. It was her that asked. She asked for a mediated session, in Grade 3 (laughter)...And um so I think in that case because she had been so proactive it would have been better if there had been some follow up I think.

Jessie changed schools at the start of Year 5 when a place became available at the independent school where she had been on the waiting list. Jessie was excited to start at her new school and chatted happily about it each day when Lisa asked how things were going. However, after a few weeks Lisa noticed that Jessie's initial excitement had faded and one day she confided that there were some girls at school who were 'hassling' her and 'making life difficult'. Over the next few weeks, Lisa kept a close eye on how Jessie was coping and asked her to let her know straightaway if she started to feel that the girls were making her 'unhappy at school' or 'not want to go to school'. After about three weeks Jessie told her mother that the girls were 'not being nice now' and it was starting to make her feel like she was 'not enjoying going to school now'. Lisa describes how she then asked Jessie for further details because she knew that if she were to make a complaint to the school she would 'have to be quite specific'. At the same time she was cautious not to press too hard because she did not want Jessie to feel as though she had to 'make up a story' to justify herself:

And it's sort of an interesting conversation to have with an 11 year old, because you don't want to make them feel like they have to – you don't want them to think that as the victim they have to try and suddenly justify themselves. But on the other hand you don't want um, you know, wild accusations which might just be that she doesn't like someone or they don't like her sort of thing.

After thinking it over, Jessie ‘came up with a couple of specific examples’ which Lisa thought ‘might have been accidental or might have been deliberate’, but due to the extent that they had upset Jessie, did warrant further investigation. She told Jessie that she would raise the issue with her teacher, if that was what Jessie wanted. Jessie confirmed that it was and so Lisa went into the school and spoke in person with the teacher. She said that Jessie’s teacher was ‘very concerned’ and told her, ‘Right, I’ll get onto it’. The next day Lisa received a phone call from the Deputy Principal who explained how he intended to deal with the issue: all the girls would be spoken to separately to get their side of the story and then they would be brought together to talk things through. Lisa says that she was happy that he had ‘responded so quickly’ and she ‘liked the fact that he had a definite strategy that was going to be put in place’. However, she recalls becoming defensive when he told her that, at this age and knowing this particular class, it was unlikely that the behaviour was malicious:

And that part made me think, ‘Oh here we go, we are going into school mode of saying bullying doesn’t happen’ ... Because that was my, you know having spoken to a lot of people about when they’ve experienced bullying with their kids, generally, people feel that the schools don’t respond very well. That’s my experience with other friends. But um so when he said that I was ready to kind of think, ‘Oh here we go, we’re being set up to be not dealt with.’

To her surprise, these expectations were ‘not borne out’ because the Deputy Principal went on to deal with the matter ‘so very well’. By the end of the week Lisa had another ‘hour and a half phone call’ with him where he detailed what he had discovered in his meetings with the girls and what action he proposed to take. He did not think that the two incidents Jessie had reported were

necessarily malicious, but more a case of ‘personality clashes’ which the school would try and help the girls resolve through discussion and social skills training. However, in the course of his investigations he had discovered another incident about which he was seriously concerned and was not going to ‘let go’.

Unbeknownst to Jessie, another girl in the class had created a social media page which stated that Jessie was unwanted at the school and the page had attracted several ‘likes’. Lisa describes how unsettling it was to learn that Jessie had been the target of cyber bullying:

And that gave me the creeps that one, because you know the whole idea that you can’t just go home and you know, if you are being bullied at school, if you can’t go home and not, that whole cyber thing adds a whole new element to it I think.

Lisa was relieved that the school viewed this incident seriously and had acted accordingly. She describes how the Deputy Principal had ‘hailed the kid in quick smart, it [the page] was taken off immediately and a letter was sent to the child’s parent’. Further, the class teacher held several in-class discussions about ‘cyber bullying and what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable’. Lisa says that over the next few weeks she received a ‘series of emails and phone calls’ from the Deputy Principal to ensure that Jessie was now happy at school and to invite Lisa to come and talk further if she wished. After monitoring the situation for a few more weeks, Lisa said that there had been no further incidents and unless something else came up, she was ‘happy to drop it’. Lisa was very positive about the response she had received from the school and felt that it reflected the school’s stated policy of responding quickly to any concerns raised by parents:

I think it actually links into that they have a policy of responding quickly to all sorts of things. So I think on the first day, when we went in on the first day, when the parents came in the Deputy Principal spoke at that thing of: 'If there is ever a problem, we want to deal with it within three days. As soon as you are concerned come to us, talk to us. Within three days we will have, you know, something will be happening.'

For Lisa this experience confirmed that should Jessie have any further issues with bullying, she could approach the school with some confidence. Importantly, she also felt that through this experience she had been able to check that she and Jessie could talk openly about these kinds of issues:

I think um it's sort of interesting because it also makes you think about what sort of people you're bringing up, in terms of how they will deal with conflict and bullying. And, and, I don't know, I don't know why some people get bullied really badly and some people don't. Um, but certainly it's a good opportunity to just get mild bullying so that you can have these conversations that open up and you know, you should certainly check that those communication things are going on.

Sally

Sally lives with her two sons in a rural town in southern Tasmania. At the time of our interview Sally's younger son, Lachlan, was in Year 7 at an independent school in Hobart while her elder son attended a different school. Although both boys had attended the same primary school, Sally had chosen to send them to different secondary schools to meet their specific social and learning needs. Sally explained that Lachlan has a significant intellectual delay and requires a high degree of social support. Although Lachlan has not been bullied at school, he has frequently been the target of bullying by children from other

schools while travelling on school buses. In her account, Sally describes her experiences of reporting bullying on the bus to two schools with different levels of satisfaction. She sees the bus as an ‘uncontrolled environment’ in which it is difficult to determine ‘where responsibility lies’ for ensuring children’s safety.

Sally began by her account by recalling that her elder son had also experienced bullying on the bus when he was in primary school. Rivalries between children from various schools in the area were played out on the bus, and students at the school her son attended were often subjected to physical and verbal bullying. Sally had instructed her son to try and avoid the bullying by sitting up the front of the bus near the driver, and when it came time for Lachlan to travel to school on the bus she ‘primed’ him to do the same. However, while her elder son was able to follow her instructions and so avoid the worst of the bullying, Sally says that Lachlan’s intellectual delay makes it much more difficult for her to communicate with him about what happens on the bus and what he should and shouldn’t do.

Sally says that since starting secondary school Lachlan has experienced numerous incidents of bullying on the bus. While he was in primary school Lachlan only needed to travel a short distance on the bus. However, the trip to school is now much longer and he also needs to wait unsupervised between connecting buses. Sally fears that as a result he is now much more vulnerable to sustained periods of bullying each day. She tells how difficult it is to monitor Lachlan’s safety on the bus trip and to piece together information about any incidents that take place. She describes the circuitous route by which she investigated one recent incident on the bus. She was first alerted that something was wrong when the mother of another child who travels on the bus emailed her

to ask if she was aware that there had been ‘things going on’ on the bus where Lachlan had been the butt of some cruel jokes. Later that week, Lachlan arrived home extremely agitated and saying that he had ‘a problem on the bus and punched this guy and put him in hospital’. Sally did not think this could be true because the bus company had her contact details and she hadn’t heard anything from them. However, Lachlan insisted that it had happened.

The next morning she spoke to each of the bus drivers on Lachlan’s route, but neither could recall any such incident taking place. She then spoke with Lachlan’s teacher who investigated with another student in the class who catches the same bus. It emerged that Lachlan had not punched anyone but there had been bullying on the bus which involved Lachlan being filmed and ridiculed by other children. Sally surmised that Lachlan had not known how to tell her what had actually happened and had instead told her what he had wished to do in response:

I think, what happened was that that was what he would have liked to have done, but he wouldn’t, he didn’t do it. He just was so angry and frustrated and he didn’t know what to do, and that was his way of saying, this is what happened.

The next day another mother stopped Sally at the bus stop to talk to her about what had been happening on the bus and was able to give Sally the name of the main perpetrator of the bullying who attended another independent school in the area. Sally then contacted the school to make a complaint. The staff member she spoke with responded by saying, ‘Yes, this is terrible. No, this can’t happen. We really need to do something.’ The school investigated the incident and identified a number of students who had been involved and brought them in for meetings. They then phoned Sally to let her know what they had done and to ask

what she would like done from there. Sally declined the offer of a face to face meeting with the children, saying that she 'didn't want any confrontation' but agreed that 'a letter of apology would be really good'. However, she ruefully observed that two months had passed and she had yet to receive the letter of apology.

Overall, Sally was pleased with the response she received from the school in that they clearly acknowledged that the behaviour was unacceptable. She contrasts this with the less satisfactory response she received more recently from another school when she rang to report some bullying that had taken place while Lachlan was waiting for his connecting bus. A boy from that school had developed a grievance against Lachlan and had physically attacked him. The next day Sally telephoned the boy's school to report the incident. When she named the boy involved, the staff member she spoke to replied, 'Oh, he's a reasonable boy, we'll talk to him', and told Sally that she would get back to her. Several days later Sally had not heard anything from the school. In the meantime, the boy had again attacked Lachlan while they waited for their bus. Sally concluded that either the school had not spoken to the boy at all, or if they had it had only served to make him angrier with Lachlan than before. Sally was disappointed not only with the apparent ineffectiveness of the school's response, but also with their lack of acknowledgement of the unacceptability of the behaviour:

[The school] were matter of fact. Um, 'Oh no, he is a reasonable guy. I'm sure I can just have a talk with him and it will be fine.' Um, no sympathy, no, 'Oh, this is not very good is it?'... As a parent, you do want someone to say, 'Oh, that's not good'. I mean we all would acknowledge that's not good, why do I need someone to say it to me? I don't know.

For Sally, such a lack of acknowledgement adds further pressure to the heavy load she carries as the sole parent of a child with an intellectual disability whilst also caring for another child. She describes how exhausting it is to be constantly having to advocate on behalf of Lachlan with schools, bus companies and numerous other organisations he comes in contact with:

So I just feel as though, you know, you are just always, 'Oh (sigh) OK, what else is there? Who do I have to phone today? Who do I have to email? Who do I have to write to now?'

Sally determined that if she did not hear back from the school that day she would contact them again to pursue them matter. She said although she is 'not very good at confrontation' she also feels strongly that it is important for parents to 'go through the process' and keep following up bullying incidents with schools:

Because it's not just your child: it's never just your child who is being bullied. It's always someone else, there's got to be other people who are being bullied at the same time. If you don't follow it up for your child there are other kids who are just going to continue to be bullied.

Julia

Julia lives with her husband and three children in suburban Hobart. At the time of our interview Julia's son Adam was in Year 7 at a government secondary school, and her two younger children attended the local government primary school which Adam had also attended. Although Adam had experienced some minor bullying from other students since starting secondary school, of greater concern to Julia were the bullying behaviours by teachers which Adam had told her about. In Julia's view, such behaviour by teachers represents an abuse of their authority and puts children at risk both in terms of their mental health and

educational outcomes. Julia describes how she and her husband called the school to account regarding the behaviour of one particular teacher who bullied Adam and some other students. Although Julia was happy with the initial response she received to her complaint, she was disappointed with the lack of follow up from the school. She suspected that rather than sanctioning teachers who bully students, the school may have a culture of protecting them, thus perpetuating the behaviour.

Julia began her account by explaining that Adam is not the kind of child to be in trouble with teachers because he is a 'very well behaved' and 'conscientious student' who 'always plays by the rules'. She tells with pride how Adam has won several academic prizes and says that he sees school as 'a pathway to your future'. A major disappointment in Adam's transition to secondary school has been that due to his negative experiences with one particular teacher, he no longer wishes to study a subject for which he had previously shown an avid interest. Julia tells how Adam had 'a passion' for this subject area from a very young age. He had been excited to be studying the subject in secondary school, but had soon begun to complain to his parents about the teacher's manner towards him and the other students. Adam told his parents that the teacher did not explain herself clearly and then 'barked and shouted' at students when they did not understand what she wanted them to do. Adam also told his parents that the teacher refused to make any accommodations for his friend who has dyslexia and had humiliated him in front of the entire class on more than one occasion. Julia was concerned by what Adam was telling her but did not contact the school straightaway. She explains that her usual response when her children come home with complaints about school is to wait and see if the issue is an isolated incident or part of a pattern of behaviour, and she applied the same principle here.

However, during this period Julia's husband heard through work colleagues that this particular teacher had been at the school for a long time and had a reputation for bullying students. Adam continued to come home with stories of ill treatment of himself and his classmates by the teacher, and now also vowed never to study the subject again. Knowing what a long standing passion Adam had for the subject and how he had hoped it would be a pathway to further studies in the area, Julia and her husband were perturbed by this and decided that they needed to do something to address the situation:

She has actually killed it for him. And I'm sorry, that's to me a real travesty, because, um, you know, if teachers are doing that to students, it certainly doesn't, as a parent, it's very sad to see that, that you know, something that your child had a passion for has been killed because of a bad experience...so that's why we decided to do something about it because we just didn't want him to continue being bullied.

Julia tells how she consulted the Department of Education website to see what it said about 'what the teachers' responsibilities are'. Based on what she read there and what Adam had told her, she concluded that this particular teacher was not providing 'a safe learning environment' for her students and that 'some of the behaviours that she was exhibiting were definitely bullying'. Julia and her husband then asked Adam to 'write down exactly what had occurred' so that they had something to take to the school. During our interview Julia read excerpts from emails Adam had written detailing his complaints, and she gave particular emphasis to the connections Adam had drawn between what he had been taught about standing up to bullies in primary school and the bullying behaviour he was now witnessing from his teacher.

Julia's husband telephoned the school and asked to make an appointment to see the Principal. He was directed to the Year 7 Coordinator who agreed to meet with him and Julia. They showed Adam's emails to the Coordinator along with the information Julia had found on the Department of Education's website 'about bullying and how teachers are to behave towards children'. The Coordinator noted that the observations Adam had made in his email were 'incredibly insightful for someone of his age' and agreed that the behaviour he described was 'not consistent with what was stated on the Department's website'. She undertook to speak to the teacher involved and said that she would report back to them.

Soon after the meeting the Coordinator contacted Julia's husband to let him know that the teacher 'had been spoken to'. Julia says that she and her husband were happy with the outcome of the meeting and felt that they'd had 'a fair hearing'. However, Julia says that while the initial response from the school was 'positive' she was disappointed that there was 'no other follow up' from the school to check if the situation had improved:

I would have liked the school to have followed up. Just to say, just to check, and it's more about um our son's mental wellbeing, not about getting a teacher into trouble or anything like that. It's the effect it was having on him and his learning experience.

As Julia continued to monitor the situation with Adam, it seemed to her that the school's intervention had little effect on the teacher's behaviour. Adam reported that on one or two occasions the teacher seemed to be 'trying to make an effort' but after that she had gone back to shouting at the students and the bullying behaviour continued. Rather than going back to the school for another

conversation, Julia and her husband decided that they would now make a formal written complaint to the Principal. They had come to this decision partly because of their dissatisfaction with the outcome of their initial complaint, but also because they now had broader concerns about how such complaints about teachers were dealt with by the school. Julia says that they were aware of another parent who had complained to the school about the inappropriate treatment of their child who has a learning disability. The parent had tried several times to meet with the Principal who had ‘never got back to him’ and was now fearful that if he ‘pushed it too hard’ there may be ‘payback’ for his son in terms of how he was treated by the teacher in question. In addition, Adam had recently told them about another teacher who told students who complained that he was treating them unfairly, ‘Don’t bother telling your parents or anyone else here, because the school won’t do anything about it.’ Taken together, these things suggested to Julia that rather than sanction teachers who bully students the school may be ‘protecting’ them:

So we are concerned that they are just sweeping it under the carpet. And that they’re protected. You know we were wondering whether the school is just protecting the teachers. Maybe it’s the Education Union – we’re not sure what, why if this teacher has a history of bullying students why she, why it’s never been addressed.

At the time of our interview, Julia and her husband had not yet made a written complaint to the Principal. However, Julia says they are determined to ‘follow it through’ because they do not think it is a ‘healthy environment for children to be learning in when they’re being humiliated by a teacher’. Although she says they ‘can’t go into battle for other parents’ Julia expresses concern about

the impact such experiences may have on students who are already struggling at school and who may not be able to speak out or call on their parents for help as Adam had:

We don't want other students to have to go through this with this teacher, because my son is somebody who will come to us and talk to us. And so we're very lucky. But not all students say anything to their parents. And they just put up with it.

Kim

Kim lives with her husband and three children in a rural area in southern Tasmania. The family had moved to the area from interstate during the previous year when Kim's middle child, Ruby, was in Year 4. Initially all three children attended their local government primary school. At the time of our interview, Kim's eldest child had moved on to secondary school and her youngest child remained at the local primary school. However, Ruby had transferred to a different government school at the start of Year 5 due to her experiences with bullying.

In her account, Kim describes how the small size of the local school and its composite class structure had contributed to a situation in which Ruby was vulnerable to relational bullying by older children in her class. She tells how Ruby had become increasingly distressed by the behaviour of one girl in the class with whom she had formerly been friends. A major frustration for Kim was the discrepancy between how she and school staff interpreted the interactions between the two girls. While Kim saw it as a case of bullying due to the disparity in the girls' ages, the Principal viewed it as a case of conflict between friends. Fearing the effects of sustained bullying on Ruby's wellbeing, Kim decided to move her to

a larger government school in a nearby area. However, she tells how she needed to draw on all her advocacy skills to convince education authorities to allow such a move.

Kim began her account by noting that the bullying Ruby had experienced mainly related to the age gap which existed between her and a number of her classmates. When she arrived in Tasmania Ruby was placed in a composite class in which some students were two or three years older than her. Although Ruby was well able to keep up academically, Kim saw that she struggled with social relations with a few of the older girls in her class:

Because it was a combination class I think, she had those kids that were quite a bit older than her. And going through different phases, and more, I don't know, more mentally aware of how to manipulate younger children, you know. And she was just having trouble keeping up with that...You know I think girls can probably be a bit more manipulative than boys. And she was being picked on and excluded.

Ruby was particularly distressed by the behaviour of one older girl in the class who had initially befriended her but then began to call her names and exclude her. Kim recalls that at first she thought the friendship might just be going through a rough patch and, given a bit of time and space, the problem would 'blow over'. She advised Ruby to play with someone else for a while to help diffuse the situation. However, this proved difficult in such a small school where there was 'nowhere else to go' and 'no other group of girls to escape to'. As the year progressed, Kim could see that Ruby was struggling to cope, and the situation was also beginning to have flow-on effects at home:

She'd come home crying and she'd be upset about other things at home as well, you know. I could see that she was really struggling and suffering from this. And it was kind of being reflected in lots of different areas of her life, her home life and getting along with her sisters and family.

Kim tells how she had advised Ruby to 'tell the teacher when these things happened'; yet when she did so, 'nothing much seemed to be done about it'. Finally, Kim decided to raise the matter with Ruby's teacher during a parent-teacher interview. The teacher commented that he had noticed 'something going on' and promised he would 'keep an eye on it'. However, Kim was dissatisfied with this because the teacher did not give any indication of what strategies he might use to intervene in the bullying. Further, Kim felt that he did not seem to appreciate the subtleties of 'girls' bullying':

It was a male teacher as well, and I don't know if they're as sensitive to girls' bullying. It's different to boys' bullying. It's not as visible and it's more subtle and emotional. And I'm not sure if – he is a very experienced teacher and great in lots of other ways – but maybe guys just aren't as sensitive to those kinds of things as a woman is. I don't know.

Despite her dissatisfaction with the response she received from Ruby's teacher, Kim was glad that she had reported the bullying in case something more serious eventuated: 'If they see anything or if anything did eventuate, you know, more physical or more aggressive, it's been reported, so you know it's on record.'

Not long after this meeting, the two girls were involved in a verbal stoush in the playground and were summoned to the Principal's office. The Principal conducted a mediation session with the girls and later told Kim that he felt the problem had now been resolved as the girls had walked out of his office 'as

friends'. Kim was again sceptical that this would be enough to protect Ruby from further bullying. In her view, the Principal had misread the situation as one of conflict between friends rather than the bullying of a younger child by an older one.

It just seemed that they saw it one way and I saw it a different way, you know. And those two ways, you know, they weren't going to meet. ... I think maybe they saw this as two girls just having a conflict. I didn't see it that way, you know? So they then didn't label it as bullying, they didn't recognise it as bullying so it didn't come under that category for them.

With no acknowledgement of Ruby's more vulnerable position in the relationship, Kim was concerned that the situation 'would just go on and on', and with Ruby becoming increasingly anxious 'that would not be good for her at all.'

At this point, Kim decided to withdraw Ruby from the school and send her to a larger government school where she would not be so much younger than her classmates and would also have a greater range of children to play with. However, gaining approval for this move was not as straightforward as Kim hoped it would be. In her application to the new school, she cited 'unresolved bullying' as the reason for wishing to withdraw Ruby from her current school. However, the Principal at Ruby's school disputed this interpretation of events and claimed that the problem had been resolved. Consequently, the application was rejected. Kim describes what an anxious time the family had over the long school holidays as she telephoned and emailed various contacts in the Department of Education trying to have the decision reversed. Eventually she met with success by contacting a member of the Parents and Citizens Association, who then advocated with the Department of Education on her behalf. In the new school year Ruby

was enrolled at the larger primary school where Kim says she has settled well and can easily find respite from situations which, in a smaller school, might escalate:

It's a bigger group of friends, there's a big group of girls, well like six or seven girls that are really good friends for her...And you know she did have a little trouble with another girl, but she could easily deal with it because of the size. She could just, you know, hang out with some other girls for a little while.

Chapter 6: Restitution

Introduction

In the previous chapter I provided interpretive accounts of the stories parents told during the interviews about their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school. This chapter is the first of three chapters which explore key ways in which parents' stories of these experiences resonate with the three basic narrative types proposed by Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller* (2013). The first of these is the restitution narrative which Frank identifies as the storyline or plot which most commonly underlies stories of illness. According to Frank, the basic storyline of restitution, 'yesterday I was healthy, today I am sick but tomorrow I'll be healthy again', conforms to a culturally preferred view of illness as a temporary disruption to the normal condition of health (p. 77). Further, Frank argues that this storyline sits comfortably within a modernist master narrative in which there is an expectation that 'for every suffering there is a remedy' (p. 80). A key feature of the restitution narrative as outlined by Frank is that the remedy to suffering is provided by an agent external to the storyteller, most often by a physician or other medical expert. In restitution stories, professionals therefore fulfil a crucial function, drawing on their knowledge and expertise to provide a diagnosis and determine a treatment plan to resolve the problem at hand.

All of the parents who participated in this study gave accounts which, to a greater or lesser degree, draw on the basic plot of the restitution narrative as a frame of reference through which to make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to a school. Each parent described how they had sought assistance from

the school to resolve the bullying their child experienced. In doing so, they positioned themselves in a storyline which infers that the bullying they have reported is a problem to which the school can be expected to provide a solution. However, while all of the parents gave accounts which were underpinned by this expectation, only a few attributed the resolution of the bullying their child experienced to actions taken by school staff. In this chapter I focus on the stories of three parents who were satisfied with the response they received from the school to their reports of bullying: Jenny, Louise and Lisa. In what follows, I explore how these parents' accounts resonate with the key features of the restitution narrative.

A Temporary Disruption

A key feature of the restitution narrative is that illness is represented as a temporary disruption to the normal condition of health. Once the illness has been remedied life returns to normal. Similarly, in this study the majority of parents represented the bullying their child experienced as a temporary disruption to the safe learning environment they expect as part of the normal conditions of schooling. Many of the parents began their account by identifying a clear point in time when the bullying of their child had begun, and contrasted this with an earlier time when their child felt happier at school. Jenny, Louise and Lisa were among the few parents in this study who told how the school had successfully intervened in the bullying they had reported.

Jenny describes the bullying her son experienced as part of a difficult of transition from primary to secondary school which represented a brief disruption in his generally positive experiences of schooling. She tells how Will had been

part of a close knit group of friends in primary school but became the target of bullying by some of these boys soon after they began Year 7 at their local secondary school. The bullying behaviours then escalated and spread to other boys in Will's class and at sporting activities outside of school. Jenny describes how within the space of one term Will had gone from a child who was happy and engaged at school to one who felt 'desperate' at the thought of it:

It got to the point: 'Nuh, this is bad. I hate going to school. I haven't got any friends, um, I'm very lonely' and um, feeling desperate. Things were happening at school...And so yeah, it was a bit scary and not nice going to school – he didn't feel safe.

By detailing the emotional distress the bullying caused Will, Jenny establishes it as a serious problem which needed to be addressed. She tells how, after an unsuccessful attempt to speak with the parents of one of the boys who was bullying Will, she reported the bullying to the school and the situation was then resolved. By the end of the next term a series of interventions put in place by Will's Year Coordinator had taken effect, the bullying behaviours had fallen away and Will had made friends with some boys who stood up for him during the height of the bullying:

And they continue to be his very good friends at school ... So he went from being, feeling quite isolated and lonely to becoming one of that little group ... And now he's very much in that little group. So, so that made it all bearable and school became OK again.

Jenny's description of her final discussion about the bullying with Will's Year Coordinator indicates the sense of closure she felt had been brought to the situation:

I think what happened was, oh they have a festival at the school and we went along. And we saw John there, and it was just an informal chat with him. And he was sort of saying you know, 'It looks to me like things are going OK.' And we said, 'Yep, things are going OK, new friends, he's moved on, the behaviours have stopped.' Um, so that sort of seemed to bring a fairly natural end to the school's involvement I think.

Jenny also provides a coda to the story in which she describes how later in the year things 'went full circle, finally' when Will's former primary school friend, Peter, who was the main perpetrator of the bullying, apologised to him:

And he apologised to Will for what had happened and um, you know, was interested in being friends with him again, and would Will think about that? And Will took a long time and let Peter sort of sit around and wait for quite a while before he decided and now they're good friends again.

Jenny describes this exchange as an 'important part of the process' which confirmed for Will that reporting the bullying to the school had been the right thing to do. As Jenny wryly notes, Will considered receiving this apology to be something of a 'moral victory'. She also contrasts the satisfactory resolution to the bullying Will experienced with her own unresolved experiences of being bullied at work and observes that, 'Will's story was very short and sweet' by comparison.

Louise also contrasts her own protracted experiences of being bullied throughout school with the quick resolution of the bullying her daughter Charley experienced at the start of secondary school. Louise observes that when she was bullied at school there were no processes in place to do anything about it. However, when Charley was bullied Louise felt confident that the school would

act in accordance with its stated 'zero tolerance' bullying policy to resolve the situation:

It got to the point where I had to do something. There was no question of that. But I was also fairly confident that I was going to get some kind of positive response. Because a) you are out there saying that you do all of these things. So I had an expectation that they would actually do it. Um, whereas, I mean when I was a child there was no process, there was no focus, there was nothing. If you were being bullied, you just got on with it. There was, nobody did anything about it. Um, so the fact that they had, at least had these processes in place gave me an expectation that something would happen.

Louise dates the onset of the bullying Charley experienced to the first few months of Year 7 when some girls in her Home Group started 'behaving badly' towards her with 'low level' bullying such as name calling and giggling behind hands. Louise and Charley spoke regularly about what was happening and decided that as Charley seemed to be coping with it, it was not necessary to involve the school at that point. However, when the behaviour escalated to physical threats and cyber bullying Louise decided that it was time to report it to the school. Louise describes the swift response she received from Charley's Year Coordinator, and details the actions he took to intervene in the bullying. She tells how Charley was relieved by the actions the Year Coordinator took that day which did put an immediate stop to the bullying. At that point Louise considered that the matter had been dealt with and told the Year Coordinator that she did not see any reason to discuss it further:

It stopped after that. There weren't any um incidents, you know, it stopped as a result of what he had done. Um, so I didn't, I just thanked him and said that I didn't need to talk to him anymore. I was, you know, glad he had taken action and something was being done. And that, you know, my daughter was feeling a lot happier about the situation, and I was, you know, prepared to just carry on.

Similarly, Lisa was satisfied with the comprehensive response she received to her report of bullying at her daughter Jessie's new school and attributes the quick resolution of the problem to the actions taken by staff at the school. Jessie had just started in Year 5 at an independent school and, to begin with, was excited and happy about her new school. However, after a few weeks she confided to her mother that some of the girls in her class were beginning to make her feel unhappy at school. After monitoring the situation for another couple of weeks, Lisa contacted Jessie's class teacher. The next day she received a follow-up phone call from the Deputy Principal who outlined in detail the steps he would take to investigate the matter. There followed a series of telephone calls and emails in which he kept Lisa fully informed about the bullying behaviours he had discovered and what the school was doing to address them. Lisa was much relieved at this response having heard negative accounts of the way that other independent or 'private' schools respond to bullying:

I have heard other people who have been at other private schools who have not felt that bullying was dealt with at all. Um so I don't think it's just that you know, you are paying the fees and they are responsive.

After some weeks of regular contact Lisa told the Deputy Principal that things had settled down for Jessie at school again and she was now happy to let the matter

drop: ‘It was me that ended up agreeing, saying “I think this is fine at this point. And unless something else comes up again I don’t really see why we need to keep in contact.”’

Thus, Jenny, Louise and Lisa all frame their children’s experiences of bullying as a relatively brief episode in their schooling which had not resulted in any significant harm. Indeed, all three express the view that their children have learned some important life lessons through these experiences. However, this view is predicated on the knowledge that the bullying did not go on for a long period of time. By contrasting these experiences with their own more protracted experiences of bullying, Jenny and Louise highlight the contingent nature of their children’s experiences and an awareness that had the school not responded as it did the outcomes may have been very different. Lisa too is keenly aware that her daughter’s experience of being bullied was relatively brief. She reflects on stories she has heard from other parents whose children have been subject to much longer periods of bullying and considers how angry this would make her:

It must be really hard if you have got a kid who is really solidly bullied, I reckon. Like, because I think you would just be so angry. And I sort of had those initial things of, ‘Oh bugger this!’ You know, ‘My kid has been really happy for the first four or six weeks and some little bugger kid is going to try and make her life a misery. Um, how dare they?’ sort of thing. Um, and I think you would be really, really angry if you had to watch your kid being made unhappy for long, you know for long-term.

Naming the Problem

According to Frank (2013), the restitution narrative is underpinned by a modernist view of illness as a problem to be solved. Within such a view,

diagnosis plays a crucial part in determining what action will be taken to restore the ill person to health. Consequently, the identification and naming of problems is a key concern in the restitution narrative. Frank describes the storyline of the restitution narrative as ‘filled out with talk of tests and their interpretation’ (p. 77) as efforts are made to determine the exact nature of the problem.

Before approaching their child’s school with reports of bullying, many of the parents in this study spent time gathering further information about what was happening for their child at school in order to gauge the nature and extent of the problem. Parents were often unsure if what their child was experiencing could be regarded as bullying or fell within the ‘normal’ range of conflict which might be expected at school. However, once parents had made an assessment that the problem was one of bullying and decided to report it to the school, their expectation was that the school should also acknowledge the problem as bullying and respond accordingly. In stories told as restitution narratives, parents describe a close congruence between their own interpretation of the problem and that provided by the school.

In Jenny’s account the acknowledgement she received from the school when she reported the bullying marks the point in her story when things began to move towards resolution. Jenny describes how soon after she and her husband realised that Will was being bullied they approached the parents of the main perpetrator, whom they knew from primary school days. Their intention was to facilitate a ‘supervised conversation’ between the boys to try and help them work things out. However, Jenny was extremely disappointed when the other parents would not acknowledge the seriousness of the situation and refused to meet with them:

We tried talking to them and they didn't want to talk about it. They had a very different perspective on how to deal with the situation ...Um, because they had sort of taken an approach that you know, the boys need to sort it out. That this is 'just normal stuff, they need to sort of it out'. And we thought, 'No, this is not normal stuff. This is not something that boys who are 13 years old can sort, 12 and 13 years old can sort out for themselves.' So we had a different perspective on it all. And um, we felt really isolated by that, you know?

For Jenny and her husband, the different view taken by these parents as to what constitutes 'normal' behaviour amongst teenage boys presented a serious impediment to their attempts to resolve the situation: 'We couldn't understand why we were being completely blocked in our attempts to try and resolve this. And um, oh it was very painful for us.'

Up until that point, Will had been reluctant to report the bullying to the school, preferring to try and work it out himself. However, he now agreed with his parents that it was time to seek help from the school. When Jenny contacted the Year 7 Coordinator, the response she received stood in marked contrast to the denial she had encountered from the other boy's parents. Jenny describes how he immediately acknowledged the unacceptability of the behaviour and undertook to intervene in the situation: 'He was very much keen to do something, very keen. That was his instant response.' Further, he reassured Will that what had been going on was 'absolutely not on in this school. And we don't tolerate this sort of behaviour and we really want to stop it'.

Jenny was happy with the ongoing support the Year 7 Coordinator provided for Will and describes how they worked together to put a stop to the

bullying. She tells how he asked Will to come and talk to him ‘every single time something happens’ and encouraged him to see this as a way of standing up against bullying within the school generally:

He said to Will, ‘Look, I know this is hard but I think a lot of kids are going to be very um, in some ways you are setting an example. You are standing up against something that shouldn’t go on.’ And he said, ‘Other kids will notice. Hard as it is for you, they will notice that you’re prepared to stand up against it.’

In Jenny’s view this clear acknowledgement of the bullying played an important part in its resolution, enabling Will to ‘do the hard yards on it’ by reporting incidents as they occurred. This then allowed the Year 7 Coordinator to respond to each incident in a consistent and timely manner until ‘eventually it all settled down’.

Louise also emphasises the importance of the acknowledgement she received from her daughter’s school when she contacted them about the physical threats and cyber bullying Charley had experienced. On the same day that she emailed the Year Coordinator about the bullying, she received a response in which he concurred with her assessment of the behaviour as bullying, describing it as ‘disgusting behaviour’ and outlined the sanctions which would be taken against the girls if they ‘continued to bully’. Louise was happy that the school had taken her report seriously and was taking action to intervene. However, she also notes that the school’s response may have been influenced by the fact that hers was not the first report of bullying concerning these particular girls:

I think by the time I reported it I wasn't the first or the only report about the behaviour of the same group of people. Um, so there was an established pattern already. In a sense, they had a track record.

Further, Louise notes that the behaviour she reported was clearly identifiable as bullying and had come after a period in which Charley experienced a range of behaviours which were more open to interpretation and which might be seen as 'just being mean'. Louise observes that bullying behaviours occur on a spectrum and parents need to make a judgement about the point at which it is necessary or advisable to report it:

I mean for a while Charley didn't want me to report it. She felt she was coping on her own, and she had some coping mechanisms, and she was. It wasn't bothering her. But when it escalated it was. So you've got to make a judgement about – I mean because you can't rush in and fight every battle. There's a point at which they have to learn to get on with people, whatever. So someone being a bit mean, or whatever, is one end of the spectrum, but once – you know and calling you names and stuff, it's kind of unpleasant, but it's kind of middling – but once they get to threats and spreading false rumours and all the rest of it, then you definitely have to step in.

Matters of interpretation also posed difficulties for Lisa in deciding whether or not she should make a report of bullying at her daughter Jessie's new school. When Lisa first realised that Jessie was unhappy at school she was unsure if the issue was one of bullying or 'just normal friend type stuff'. She describes how she tried to tease this out with Jessie:

'Is this just a difference of opinion and something where you don't like someone and they don't like you, or are they actually deliberately trying to

make you unhappy?’ So to me that’s kind of a, that’s that line. You know there is a certain amount of stuff that you’ve got to deal with... You know I start off by saying to Jessie, ‘Everyone has the right not to like you and you have the right not to like them. Um, you don’t have to be friends with everyone.’

When Jessie became increasingly disturbed by what was happening at school, Lisa pressed her for details of incidents, telling her that if they were going to do anything about it they would need to be specific: ‘Um, I can’t ring the school or speak to your teacher and say Jessie says they’re bullying. Because their first question is going to be, “What has happened?”’ Eventually Jessie cited a couple of incidents which Lisa then reported to her class teacher. The teacher responded with immediate concern, telling Lisa that she would ‘get right onto it’. Lisa was happy with the seriousness with which the school seemed to regard her report as indicated by the fact that it was referred on to the Deputy Principal. She did, however, experience a moment of doubt when it seemed that the Deputy Principal interpreted the behaviour she had reported as social ineptitude rather than malicious bullying. Based on stories she had heard from other parents, Lisa was concerned that this meant that the school would ignore or attempt to deny the bullying:

And that part made me think, ‘Oh here we go, we are going into school mode of saying bullying doesn’t happen’ ... Because that was my, you know having spoken to a lot of people about when they’ve experienced bullying with their kids, generally, people feel that the schools don’t respond very well. That’s my experience with other friends. But um so when he said that I was ready to kind of think, ‘Oh here we go, we’re being set up to be not dealt with.’

However, her concerns were allayed when the Deputy Principal went on to resolve the situation ‘really quickly and well’. He informed Lisa that while he was satisfied that the incidents she had reported were misunderstandings which had now been resolved, he had discovered a derogatory social media post about Jessie which he regarded as a serious issue and would be pursuing. For Lisa, this discovery overshadowed her concerns about the incidents she had originally reported and she was relieved that the school recognised it as a serious issue:

And that gave me the creeps that one, because you know the whole idea that you can’t just go home and you know, if you are being bullied at school, if you can’t go home and not, that whole cyber thing adds a whole new element to it I think...So he hauled the kid in quick smart. Um, it [the page] was taken off immediately and um, a letter was sent to that child’s parent.

In addition to these disciplinary measures, the school initiated class discussions about the responsible use of social media and follow up meetings were held between the Deputy Principal and a number of girls in the class. In Lisa’s view these combined actions sent a clear message to the girls that the behaviour would not be tolerated and from that time on Jessie did not report any further incidents.

A Clear Plan of Action

In the restitution narrative, the diagnosis of an illness is followed by a plan for its treatment. According to Frank those who tell restitution narratives seek a return of predictability in their lives and look to professionals to prescribe a course of action which will restore them to health. Similarly, parents who took part in this study looked to schools to provide a clear plan of action to restore a sense of safety in their child’s day to day life at school. Those parents who told their stories as restitution narratives found reassurance in knowing that their

child's school had clear policies and processes in place to deal with bullying. In these accounts, school bullying policies were not just words on paper, but were enacted as clear systems of pastoral care, behaviour management and communication with parents.

In her account, Jenny portrays the Year 7 Coordinator as a very experienced teacher who knew what to do to put a stop to the bullying. She tells how he quickly laid out a plan which would enable him to follow up any further incidents of bullying directed towards Will:

We talked to John and he said, 'Now, what you need to do Will, is you need to come and talk to me every single time something happens. And you need to do it on the day as soon as possible. Because then I will deal with it.'

So we started off with Will trying to report to him any further events at school. And, as a consequence, John then called those kids into his office and spoke to them and said, 'This is not on. You need to stop it.'

Jenny saw these actions as being in line with the school's policies regarding student behaviour which are clearly communicated to students and their parents via student diaries:

They've got very clear policies, very clear guidelines, they're all there in writing for them to read in their diaries, um: 'This is what happens if you don't behave properly.' And so that was very clear, right from the beginning, we knew that they had a very clear process for dealing with it.

At the same time, Jenny expressed appreciation for the way in which the Year 7 Coordinator recognised the situation as one which required attention to pastoral care as well as disciplinary action. She tells how he facilitated a meeting

with Will and some of his classmates to think of ways they could help one of the boys who had been bullying Will, to provide him with greater social support whilst also trying to stop the bullying behaviours:

And that meeting did go ahead. Will was happy to be part of it. So it was very much taking a community approach. And saying, 'You know, we're all part of a community, things happen to members of our community at different times, and we need to get together and work out what's the best way. What ideas do we have?'

Although it took some weeks for these measures to stop the bullying, throughout this period Jenny found reassurance in the frequent communication she had with the Year 7 Coordinator. Through emails and face to face meetings they exchanged information about how things were progressing and what else might be done to support Will through the process.

Louise also notes the close congruence between the stated bullying policies at her daughter's school and the actions taken by the school when she made her report of bullying. As discussed previously, Louise was well aware of the school's 'zero tolerance' stance on bullying behaviours. Consequently, she had some confidence that the school would act on her report of bullying. She also highlights the importance for parents of knowing who to contact within the school to report bullying. She observes that, having met and established a relationship with Charley's Home Room teacher at the start of the year, she fully expected that she could contact him about the bullying and he would respond to her concerns:

I had already established a relationship, you know, I had met the Home Room teacher. He had given me this expectation that he was contactable, that he was responsive, that he would talk to me about any of my concerns.

So I was in a position where I was fairly sure that something was going to be done, that my report was going to be taken seriously.

As it happened, Charley's Home Room teacher was absent on the day Louise tried to contact him, but Louise was aware that she could also contact the Grade 7 Year Coordinator with her concerns. She emailed him and received a response the same day in which he outlined the steps he had already taken and those he would be taking to intervene in the bullying. Louise was satisfied with this response, but was also reassured by the knowledge that she would have the opportunity to discuss the issue further with Charley's Home Group teacher at an upcoming parent-teacher meeting. Although the bullying directed towards Charley had stopped by the time this meeting took place, Louise was pleased to learn that Charley's Home Group teacher and other teaching staff had been made aware of the situation and were continuing to work with the perpetrators of the bullying through counselling and social skills training. For Louise, this information provided confirmation that the school did indeed take reports of bullying seriously and had provided a comprehensive response.

In addition to quickly stopping the bullying, Louise notes that a further positive outcome of the way in which the school responded to her report was that Charley now trusted the school's reporting processes. Previously, Charley had expressed concerns that reporting bullying to the school would only 'make things worse'. When this proved not to be the case, she and her friends began to use the school's student reporting system whenever they experienced or witnessed bullying. As Louise explains, this allowed her to step back again and let Charley take responsibility for alerting the school to any further problems:

I haven't had to get involved again, because by the time I know it's happened, Charley said, 'Oh no, we've put in a Bullying and Harassment form about that already.' ... They all know, all the students know, that if they're being harassed or bullied in any way, they can report it via this form. And obviously they know that action will then be taken. That they will be spoken to about what they said, and the others will be spoken to. So it's a sort of an alerting mechanism that they feel comfortable using and accessing. And um, that the school takes seriously, and actually acts on.

Louise's description of the trust Charley now has in the school's reporting systems reflects her own satisfaction with the way that the school responded to her report of bullying. For Louise, a key factor in this was the congruence between the stated bullying policies of the school and the clear processes she encountered when she made her report of bullying.

Similarly, Lisa found reassurance in knowing that the school had a 'definite plan of action' to resolve the bullying her daughter was experiencing. She also appreciated the frequent communication she had with school staff as they worked to resolve the problem. However, while Jenny and Louise viewed the response they received from their child's school as evidence of a close match between the school's stated bullying policies and the way in which they were implemented, Lisa saw the school's response as part of a broader policy of responding quickly to parental concerns about any aspect of their child's education:

I think it actually links into that they have a policy of responding quickly to all sorts of things. So I think on the first day, when we went in on the first day, when the parents came in the Deputy Principal spoke at that thing of, 'If there is ever a problem, we want to deal with it within three days. As soon as

you are concerned come to us, talk to us. Within three days we will have, you know, something will be happening.’

Nonetheless, all three parents represented the response they received from their child’s school as evidence of a clear connection between the stated policies at the school and the systems in place to support them.

Parental Agency

As noted previously, a key feature of the restitution narrative is that the storyteller does not position themselves as an active agent in bringing about a resolution to the problem at hand. According to Frank, agency in the restitution narrative lies most often with professionals who use their expert knowledge to resolve the problem. Further, Frank argues that within this narrative type, the relationship between the storyteller and the active agent is represented as asymmetrical and the person ‘who adopts this narrative as his own self-story thereby accepts a place in a moral order that subordinates him as an individual’ (Frank, 2013, p. 93).

In this study, only a few parents represented school staff as active agents in bringing about a resolution to the bullying they had reported. Those parents who told their stories as restitution narratives gave detailed accounts of the actions taken by school staff which brought an end to the bullying. However, unlike the narrator of the restitution narrative, these parents do not position themselves as subordinate to the professionals from whom they sought help. Rather, these parents’ stories are imbued with a sense of collaboration as they describe the close communication maintained between themselves and school staff until such time as both parties agreed that the bullying had been resolved. Further, these parents do

not represent themselves as passive recipients of the solutions offered by the school. Rather, they describe how they actively scrutinised the response they received from the school and were ready to seek alternative solutions if the school failed to prevent further bullying of their child.

In her account, Jenny portrays the Year 7 Coordinator as a skilled professional with many years of experience working with this particular age group. She describes how she and Will took heart from the counsel he gave them ‘because he’s been Year 7 Coordinator for a long time there, so he knows about stuff’. In particular Jenny was impressed by his understanding of the complex social dynamics which underlie bullying situations and the need to take a ‘communal’ approach to resolving them; a view which she strongly shares and expounded on during our interview.

However, Jenny was not as approving of all the interventions suggested by the school. She tells how, at an initial meeting about the bullying, she vetoed suggestions by Will’s Home Group teacher who seemed ‘very much into a punishment perspective’ which neither she or Will were ‘at all comfortable with’. For Jenny it was very important that there was agreement between all parties about how to handle the situation and she was relieved when the Home Group teacher agreed to ‘step out’ of the situation. Jenny goes on to describe how she and the Year 7 Coordinator then worked collaboratively to bring an end to the bullying, with each contacting the other as the need arose:

Um, and it was, it was very easy to make appointments. If I said, ‘John, we need to have another appointment’ he’d say, ‘Yep, it can be today at 2 o’clock, or it can be tomorrow at 8 o’clock. You know, whatever works best for you.’ So very responsive; he wasn’t saying, ‘Oh, can we make it next

Friday?’ He was right, very much wanting to be on to it. And, so I don’t know how many meetings we had with John.

Louise also clearly positions her daughter’s Year Coordinator as an active agent in resolving the bullying when she says that it ‘stopped as a result of what he had done’. However, she also represents herself as a participant in resolving the problem when she details the actions she took to prevent further bullying of Charley on Facebook:

And fortunately I know enough about Facebook and how it all works to know that we could stop that by blocking those people. She didn’t know that...So I showed her how to. I knew you could do it, but I had to look up how. Um, so we managed to stop that, by blocking them.

Although Louise was happy with the response she received from the school, she indicates that had this not been the case she would have been prepared to pursue the matter further: ‘If you don’t get a positive response you have to keep asking why not and what’s happening and so forth.’

Similarly, Lisa is appreciative of the actions taken by the school but continues to monitor the situation, remaining alert to any recurrence of bullying directed towards Jessie. She tells how she listened in to a phone call Jessie received from a classmate, fearing that it may be a continuation of the bullying:

On the Saturday after the term had finished we got a phone call from one of these girls...And I thought, ‘Oh, here we go.’ And that’s where I thought we were lining up for a malicious bullying type thing...And I heard, I listened in, not on the other side, I just stood in the same room, um, because I was concerned that they were going to, that they were pursuing her.

Although Jessie showed no sign that this was the case, Lisa reported the call to the Deputy Principal who then ‘hailed’ the girls in to question them about it. In Lisa’s view, this action conveyed a clear message to the girls that the school would not tolerate bullying, and ‘that was the end of it’. However, Lisa remained wary of the potential for further cyber bullying and told the Deputy Principal that although she was now happy to let the matter drop, cyber bullying ‘is something that we have to be aware of forever’. For Lisa, this brief experience with cyber bullying alerts her to the need to remain vigilant as Jessie and her peers enter adolescence: ‘It certainly makes you think: What if you get someone, you know, in a year or two when they’re older and they’ve got more capacity to be deliberately um, you know, mean?’

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how Jenny, Louise and Lisa gave accounts which resonate strongly with key features of the restitution narrative. However, in contrast to the restitution narrative as described by Frank, these parents do not position themselves as subordinate to the professionals from whom they seek help. Rather they maintain a strong sense of agency in their dealings with the school and a preparedness to advocate strongly on behalf of their child should the need arise. In these accounts there is an awareness that, although the bullying their child experienced was resolved, things could have turned out quite differently. As I will show in the following chapters, the response that parents receive from school staff to their initial reports of bullying is pivotal to how they narrate their reporting experiences and the type of agency they claim for themselves as they do so.

Chapter 7: Chaos

Introduction

The second narrative type proposed by Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller* (2013), is the chaos narrative, which he defines as opposite to restitution in that 'its plot imagines life never getting better' (p. 97). While the restitution narrative is underpinned by the modernist assumption that illness can be cured through the application of professional expertise, the chaos narrative represents the fear that there is no cure to be found and suffering will continue indefinitely. Frank argues that 'in these stories the modernist bulwark of remedy, progress and professionalism cracks to reveal vulnerability, futility and impotence' (p. 97). A key feature of the chaos narrative is the sense that no-one is in control: neither the storyteller nor the professionals from whom they seek help are able to solve the problem at hand. According to Frank, chaos narratives provoke anxiety because they 'tell how easily any of us could be sucked under' (p. 97). While restitution narratives provide reassurance that things will turn out alright in the end, chaos narratives contain the threat that at any moment any one of us could fall victim to pain and suffering without end.

Many of the parents who participated in this study gave accounts which evoked elements of the chaos narrative. Many described feeling powerless as they witnessed their child's distress and the school took no effective action in response to their reports of bullying. Some also described how the ineffective response they received from the school not only put their child at risk of further bullying, but also served to undermine their confidence in themselves as a parent. In particular, a number of parents told how the lack of acknowledgement they

received from the school of the validity of their claims of bullying prompted them to question their own judgement and to doubt themselves in their role as a parent.

The sense of powerlessness and self-doubt expressed by these parents resonates strongly with the lack of agency which characterises the chaos narrative. However, only one parent adhered to this aspect of the chaos narrative throughout their account. In this study, Martin's account is notable in that he was the only parent who portrayed himself as completely powerless to alter his child's situation at school and did not envisage an end to the bullying she was experiencing. Others described periods of intense frustration and self-doubt, but also expressed a strong determination to take control of the situation. For these parents, the realisation that they could not rely on the school to protect their child from further bullying represents a turning point in their story when they decided to take further action themselves to resolve the problem. In doing so, these parents depart from the extreme vulnerability of the chaos narrative and begin to represent themselves as active agents in bringing an end to the bullying their child was experiencing.

In this chapter I focus on Martin's account as well as those of two other parents, Eve and Amanda, whose children were bullied at school over a period of several years. In what follows, I explore how these parents evoke key elements of the chaos narrative in their accounts. In particular, I consider how they represent the response they received from the school to their reports of bullying, and the influence this has for the type of agency they claim for themselves in their accounts.

An Ongoing Saga

In the restitution narrative illness is represented as a temporary condition with a beginning and an end. By contrast, in the chaos narrative there is no clear sense of how or when the illness began and no end to it in sight. As Frank explains, one of the reasons that chaos narratives can be so difficult to listen to is that they frustrate expectations of narrative sequencing and causality, of one thing leading to another. Frank argues that a sense of genesis in a story is important because it 'sets in place subsequent narrative order: something early results in something else later on' (p. 108). However, in the chaos narrative the genesis of an illness is often lost in the detail of attendant troubles and 'which came first ... is impossible to sort out' (p. 108). Further, in the chaos narrative there is no sense of an ending. There is only a sense of being stuck in 'an incessant present' in which events cycle round repeatedly (p. 99).

While many of the parents who took part in this study gave a clear description of how and when the bullying of their child began, Martin, Eve and Amanda all represented the bullying their child experienced as part of a complex web of longstanding difficulties with no clear beginning. Martin began his account by stating that it seemed as though his daughter's troubles with bullying were part of an 'ongoing saga' which had been present in one form or another since her early years in primary school. When we met for our interview, Martin's daughter Angela was in Year 7 at an independent school where she had experienced frequent relational bullying over the previous two years. However, Martin recalls that Angela's earlier years at their local government primary school were also fraught with social difficulty, which he and his wife slowly came to see

in terms of bullying and ‘an almost tribal gathering to persecute or zero in on a specific type of person’.

In Martin’s view, the causes of the bullying Angela experienced are entangled with broader cultural issues regarding how students and schools respond to difference. Throughout his account, Martin draws connections between the relational bullying directed towards Angela by her peers and her academic giftedness which marks her out as socially different. He tells how, by virtue of having interests which lie outside ‘the mainstream’ or popular culture, Angela ‘suffers the social consequences of not fitting’ and is made vulnerable as a target for bullying. Martin also associates the bullying Angela experienced with a refusal on the part of both schools she had attended to make any special provisions which might help her to feel more accepted and valued at school:

[They] simply didn’t want to individualise any help that they could give to a child. So they wanted, they would say, and I’ve heard this so often, ‘We don’t want to make a special case of such and such.’

KH: Right. So this was in relation to her academic work?

This was in relation to being, being as we saw it, bullied, because she had certain specific unusual interests and is by character a little bit eccentric...It didn’t want to create special conditions that might make her happier by for instance, giving her out of hours tutoring or something to engage that sort of brain food that she needed to keep her, to keep her interested, but also to realise that her interests, that there was nothing wrong with being interested in those kinds of things.

Martin had hoped that when Angela moved to an independent school in Year 5 she would find an environment which was more supportive of her, both educationally and socially. However, he says that her new school either did not have the capacity or was not willing to accommodate her differences and the bullying 'got worse'. By the time she was in Year 7 Angela had become highly anxious about social relations at school. Despite having numerous meetings with school staff to discuss the matter, Martin was frustrated by the lack of a cohesive plan from the school to prevent further bullying of his daughter. The bullying continued and Martin felt trapped in a cycle of trying to deal with each new crisis as it arose:

I don't see any way at the moment of us handling it, other than the way the school wants us to handle it, which is event by event. Um, and because of that, you don't see, you know, it's hard to see an end to it.

Here, Martin evokes the hopelessness of the chaos narrative in which the storyteller cannot envisage any end to the suffering they describe. This sense of hopelessness is exacerbated by the fear that if he were to move Angela to yet another school, she would only be bullied again. For Martin, this fear is bound up with a notion of bullying as behaviour which is caused by victims themselves, a notion which he also strongly resists:

And then in our weaker moments we think, 'What if she was at another school?' And, I'm pretty certain that same thing would happen. But when I say that, in fact saying it to you, behind that is me thinking, 'I wonder if my daughter will *cause* this to happen in another school the way she has *caused* it to happen in this school.' And that is highly objectionable.

In her account, Eve also presents the bullying her daughter experienced as ‘an ongoing thing’ spanning ‘two completely different schools’ over several years. At the time of our interview Eve’s daughter Jade was in Year 6 at a small government school in a rural area where she had experienced more than two years of relational bullying. She had also been bullied during her early years at school before the family moved to Tasmania. Like Martin, Eve associates the bullying her daughter encountered with a complex range of factors and struggles to give a clear account of its genesis. While she partially attributes the bullying Jade experienced on her arrival in Tasmania to the culture of the school and the small rural community of which it is a part, she also wonders if her own childhood experiences of bullying have caused Jade to become ‘the kind of person’ who is bullied:

Be it whether, be Jade a victim, or whether, I don’t know, the kind of person, I don’t know, - or hereditary, because I remember I went through a terrible situation. I remember myself being bullied, and, and my parents having to step into the school, and I remember it making it all worse. And then I found myself all these years later going through it with my own daughter.

Here, Eve portrays the bullying Jade encountered as family history repeated. She refers to this memory a number of times in her account, and in doing so evokes a sense of being stuck in a family pattern which she feels powerless to change. The story also serves to emphasise the high stakes involved in Eve’s decision to ignore the cautionary tales from her past and report the bullying to her daughter’s schools. Eve stresses how difficult it was for her to approach Jade’s teachers about the bullying, fearing that she would ‘make things worse’ as her parents had when she was bullied at school. She tells how each

time she reported the bullying, the ineffective responses she received from the school only served to confirm these fears: ‘The thing that I had dreaded from the very beginning is what happened to her. That, you know, things actually got worse.’

When Eve first approached Jade’s class teacher at her former school to discuss how Jade was being excluded from playground games by her classmates, she was hopeful that the teacher would ‘make a difference and be able to help Jade’. However, she tells how the teacher’s poor management of the situation caused an escalation in the bullying, and thus confirmed her initial reservations about contacting the school. Soon after this the family moved to a small rural community in Tasmania and Eve hoped that the move would provide a fresh start for Jade. However, she tells how Jade began to be bullied ‘on day two’ at her new school and was told by her classmates that she was not welcome at the school.

Over the next two years Jade became increasingly anxious as she was excluded and harassed by the girls in her class. Eve tells how she reported the bullying to the school numerous times without any effective response. Each time she spoke with staff about the bullying she left feeling hopeful that the problem would be solved. However, each time she was disappointed by the lack of effective action from the school and the bullying continued: ‘We all left feeling like, there’s an awareness, let’s just see where it goes. Well it didn’t go anywhere other than really, continue to get really bad.’

In describing these experiences Eve evokes the sense of being trapped in a repeating cycle of events which is a key feature of the chaos narrative. However, in contrast to the lack of resolution offered by the chaos narrative, Eve tells how

the bullying Jade experienced at school did eventually subside. By the time she was in Year 6, the social dynamics in the class had changed and Jade was far less anxious about school. Eve attributes this to a range of factors including her own actions in demanding that the Principal take a much stronger stance on bullying in the school. Further, she observes that with the end of primary school in sight Jade had begun to look forward to moving on to secondary school with a completely different set of children:

It's been the last year that we've gotten on top of it all and resolved it to the point where, where there's only, she's out of there. She knows that she is not going to be going to the same high school as these other girls. She knows that, you know, the time frame of it all is bearable.

In this way, Eve's account reflects aspects of the restitution narrative in which the storyteller either looks back on a period of suffering which is now at an end or forward to a time when the suffering will end. However, her account also draws attention to the ongoing effects of the bullying which she imagines Jade will continue to carry with her:

I would have liked for you know, yeah, not to have had to, for her, not to have had to go through all that pain, and come out you know, years later with that, that scar. You know, and having to carry that.

In her account, Amanda also tells of the trauma that she and her daughter Freya suffered through more than two years of Freya being bullied at school. When I met with Amanda, Freya was in Year 6 at a government school where she had been bullied from Years 3 to 5. Like Eve, Amanda also describes how the bullying was eventually resolved. She attributes this to a combination of her own actions and a shift in the culture at the school due to the appointment of a new

Principal. Although she tells how the bullying eventually came to an end, the bulk of Amanda's account concerns the trauma she experienced while witnessing her daughter's distress and feeling powerless to help. From this perspective, her account speaks directly to the lack of agency which is central to the chaos narrative.

For Amanda, as for Martin and Eve, it was difficult to pinpoint exactly when the bullying began. She observes that Freya found social relations at school a shock from the start as they were in such contrast to how she was treated at home. Amanda explains that as the only child of a single mother, Freya was used to having her voice heard and her opinions valued. As a teacher herself, Amanda could see how Freya's expectations surrounding this might pose problems for her at school. However, as Freya told her more about what was happening at school Amanda began to see it in terms of bullying:

Essentially we were talking about a situation where she belonged to a group, but she would get kicked out of that group, so often, like multiple times a week. She didn't know where she stood with them, and I started realising through the stories she told me at home that she really was getting treated badly. There was no, I had to tell her, as a parent, that that wasn't an OK way to treat people and she shouldn't expect that was OK.

Although Amanda advised Freya to report the bullying to the teachers, Freya refused to do so after she found that 'the teacher's intervention was either useless or made it worse'. Much of the trauma Amanda describes revolved around repeated arguments she had with Freya about the bullying and what to do about it. Amanda describes how frustrated and angry she felt when Freya told her

the same stories about what was happening at school but they could not agree on any way forward:

Um, yeah so there was a point where I think it was affecting my work, it was affecting my relationship with her, I was getting angry when she was telling me. Like I'd gotten, I'd cried about it, I'd been upset about it but I actually was getting so frustrated that she kept telling me the same things over and over and they were really upsetting, but nothing was happening and she wasn't willing to go to a teacher again.

Further, Amanda began to fear that by this stage Freya had become so ostracised at school that there was little that could be done to alter her situation:

I thought maybe at this particular school, maybe she had just gotten into a situation that it just couldn't get better ... through my own observations of watching kids socially interact at my work, I had this sinking feeling that, 'Oh, I don't think this is going to get better, no matter who intervenes or what is done now'.

In this way, Amanda's account evokes the sense of a problem 'never getting better' which Frank describes as typical of the chaos narrative. While Amanda says that her story 'sounds like it has got a happy ending' because the bullying did eventually come to an end, she emphasises the 'harrowing' effects that it had while it lasted. Further, like Eve, Amanda sees that the bullying has had lasting effects on her daughter, such as a level of defensiveness in relation to her peers and a 'jaded' attitude toward school in general.

Don't Call it Bullying

In contrast to the restitution narrative in which diagnosis precedes a plan of treatment, in the chaos narrative there is no clear identification of the nature of the problem and therefore no way to go about solving it. As Frank explains, naming one's illness is a crucial step in overcoming it: 'In the naming story the protagonist has to guess the *true* name of the antagonist ...the antagonist's power can only be undone by speaking his true name' (p. 75). In the chaos narrative those who suffer are denied a voice to name their suffering and therefore cannot overcome it.

Many of the parents in this study evoked this element of the chaos narrative as they described their deep frustration at the lack of acknowledgement they received from their child's school of the validity of their claims of bullying. Parents feared that unless the behaviour they reported was acknowledged as bullying, there would be no action taken and the bullying would continue. Such a lack of acknowledgement led some parents to question their own judgement and to wonder if what their child was experiencing was not bullying after all, but normal childhood conflict or the result of social skills deficits in their child. Such uncertainty was often expressed in tandem with doubts about their parenting abilities, further compounding their sense of being unable to alter the situation.

Throughout his account Martin presents himself as someone who has struggled to be heard by his daughter's school, and who has been denied the right to name her experiences as bullying. He describes how he made numerous attempts to 'tackle' school staff about the bullying, but each time he felt as though he was being dismissed or placated as an 'anxious parent'. He tells how he

approached Angela's class teacher who spoke glowingly about her academic achievements but would not recognise that the social difficulties she experienced at school were related to bullying:

'What fantastic grades, what wonderful work etc. etc. but', and there was a big but, 'we are not going to, we are not going to recognise that there is anything other the matter than, ah with a little bit of encouragement, ah, couldn't be solved.'

Although Angela's teacher gave Martin the impression that 'nothing was wrong' at school, she continued to come home highly distressed by the way she was treated by her classmates. Finally, Martin arranged a formal meeting with the Principal and other key staff at the school to discuss his concerns. He describes how he supported his claim that Angela was being bullied by detailing the kinds of events that were happening and noting that they were repeated, a key element in the definition of bullying. However, he was dismayed when staff rejected his interpretation of events and specifically directed him not to call the behaviour bullying. Throughout his account, Martin is highly critical of the dismissive attitude displayed by staff towards the issue of bullying: 'Almost as though it's something um, it's something dirty that the school doesn't, that they see something that should be swept under the carpet.' Further, Martin presents the school's refusal to acknowledge the bullying Angela was experiencing as one of the main reasons it continued over such a long period of time:

The issue of, of bullying, it's so difficult. It's so difficult to talk with the school about something that is occurring that's not allowed to have a label, and it not be just a sort of repetition over a protracted period of time of the same issues.

The extreme frustration which Martin felt as a result of this repetition of issues is a theme to which he returns numerous times throughout his account. In this way, his account evokes the sense of being stuck in an ‘incessant present’ which Frank describes as a key characteristic of the chaos narrative. Similarly, Eve feared that an apparent inability on the part of her daughter’s teachers to ‘see’ the bullying directed towards Jade meant that it would continue indefinitely. When she first raised the issue with Jade’s class teacher she was told that the teachers would try and observe what was happening in the playground before taking any action. However, Eve describes how the teachers failed to notice the bullying, thus allowing it to continue. Eve then started spending time in the playground at recess and lunchtimes to try and monitor the situation herself. She contrasts how easy it was for her to see the bullying directed towards her daughter ‘as clear as day’ while the teachers, whose job it was to supervise the children, did not. As she later told the Principal:

It doesn’t take much. I said, ‘You’ve got two, two teachers, they’re saying that they’re not seeing these incidents and I’m seeing stuff. I’m seeing rolls of eyes and I’m seeing nasty um gestures, and I’m seeing the body language, and, you know, I’m a mother not on duty, to be in the playground looking for these things.’ I said, ‘If you’re having trouble seeing them’, I said, ‘put more staff on. The rest of the staff are sitting in the staff room having their tea and coffee!’

Eve presents the school’s failure to acknowledge the bullying not only as a failure in pastoral care but also as an implied criticism of the veracity of her reports: ‘And it sort of made me feel as well like, I’m telling the truth here!’ For Eve, this had an incapacitating effect, causing her to worry about how she would

be perceived by Jade's teachers if she approached them about the bullying again. She tells how one day she broke down in tears and told one of the teachers of her dilemma:

I just let it all out and said you know, 'This is, this is out of control, there seems to be, um'— I said to her that I felt really stuck. I didn't want to, 'I've already spoken, we've talked to the teacher about it.' I said, 'I don't want to be the problem parent and I don't want to make things worse by, you know?' And I said, oh, and just went on about all the things, and you know, 'It's gotten really bad. It's bad.'

Amanda's story also illustrates the detrimental effects that a lack of acknowledgment can have on communications between parents and schools about bullying. Early on in her account Amanda identifies this as the main source of her dissatisfaction with the way her daughter's school responded to incidents of bullying:

I was not very happy with a couple of teachers' responses, um of stories Freya would tell me, say in the playground or in years past. And the biggest issue that I thought this school had was they were not acknowledging bullying.

Throughout her account Amanda draws on observations from her years of experience as a teacher to reflect on how important it is for teachers to acknowledge and respond to bullying situations. She tells how, as a teacher herself, she understands that competing demands for teachers' attention in the classroom can mean that they fail to notice or act on incidents of bullying. However she is adamant that failure to do so puts students at risk of further bullying. By way of example she recalls how Freya's teacher failed to intervene

when another student pulled a chair out from under her in front of the whole class. In Amanda's view this was a blatant act of bullying intended to humiliate Freya, and by choosing to overlook it the teacher sent a strong message to the perpetrator that she could continue to act in this way towards Freya without censure:

Now to me that's actually a big betrayal for Freya. That was her indicating that she was in physical danger almost, and this girl would then turn around and smirk and smile at her and let her know that she'd gotten away with it. Um, it put Freya in a very bad situation.

Amanda contrasts this with the way she would handle a similar situation in her own teaching practice. She explains that rather than give the behaviour 'safe haven' by overlooking it, she would call attention to it, not to humiliate the perpetrator, but to make it clear that she would not put up with bullying behaviours in her class:

In my experience 90% of the time adults just need to not accept it. That's all. And it's just a stance and it has to be a genuine one, but you have to be willing to see it as well.

Although Amanda displays a strong sense of agency in her professional role with regard to dealing with bullying, as a parent she was far less sure of herself and how to proceed. She tells how she struggled for two years to help Freya cope with the situation with no effective response from Freya's teachers despite numerous meetings to discuss the matter. Things came to a head when Amanda realised that over a two week period Freya had cried in bed every night and feigned illness to try and get out of going to school the next day. At that point Amanda decided that 'the next logical step' was to make an appointment for Freya and herself to meet with the Principal.

However, Amanda was extremely disappointed with the response she received from the Principal during this meeting. The meeting was over within 15 minutes and the Principal gave no undertaking that the school would do anything to resolve the problem. For Amanda the most disappointing aspect of this meeting was the Principal's failure to acknowledge the severity of the situation: 'I wanted some kind of, really that's what I found was lacking, there was no acknowledgement to me of just how terrible this was.' Although the Principal assured Amanda that she and Freya were both valued members of the school community, Amanda's impression was that in reality she regarded them as something of a nuisance for raising the issue with her:

She didn't want to know, she didn't want to know. It was either uncomfortable or hard work or something. For some reason the best outcome for the Principal I think would have been for the problem to go away, for us to just deal with it and take it away somewhere else.

Amanda represents the Principal's response as a major breach of trust which had significant implications for how she and Freya saw themselves in relation to the school. She tells how following the meeting Freya developed a more cynical attitude towards school. Rather than seeing school as a source of support or care, Freya now saw the school in adversarial terms:

Freya, I could tell, felt defeated and probably really bleak, nervous about the future. It certainly did affect my daughter's faith in school. And it still has now. She is very jaded about the whole thing... I know that through that one meeting with the Principal that time, my daughter started having a more jaded attitude to teachers and the whole thing. Because she saw that we were alone against the school.

Amanda also felt very dissatisfied with the outcome of the meeting and was ‘mystified’ as to what conclusion they had come to. Far from feeling valued by the Principal she says that she felt almost as though she had been ‘tricked’ by her:

I just thought, ‘Well, what happened then?’ I felt like I had been charmed by her, she was quite an attractive, sophisticated woman. And um I felt that she just sort of turned on all the charms and smiled and um was just lovely and assured us that we were very valued, but I thought, ‘But how? How? She’s written our name in a newsletter once.’ I couldn’t, I didn’t feel valued at all.

No-one is in Control

A key feature of the chaos narrative is the loss of control conveyed by the storyteller. As Frank observes, ‘control and chaos exist at opposite ends of a continuum’ (p. 100). Whereas the restitution narrative ‘presupposes the control that is necessary to effect restitution’, the chaos narrative presupposes lack of control not only by the storyteller but also by the professionals from whom they seek help. In the restitution narrative agency is external to the storyteller as these stories ‘demonstrate the expertise of others: their competence and their caring that effect the cure’ (p. 92). By contrast, in chaos narratives agency lies nowhere as professional expertise is called into question and ‘chaos feeds on the sense that *no-one* is in control’ (p. 100).

As discussed previously, those parents who told their stories as restitution narratives found reassurance in knowing that the school had a clear plan of action to respond to the bullying they had reported. For these parents the close congruence between the schools’ stated bullying policies and the processes in place to support them provided reassurance that the school would take action to resolve the bullying. However, for the majority of parents who took part in this

study there was no such reassurance. Many bemoaned the lack of clear policies and procedures for responding to bullying at their child's school. Others noted that while the school did have broad policy statements regarding bullying, there was little or no congruence between those statements and what happened when they reported bullying of their child to the school. Many of the parents also questioned the level of expertise of staff at their child's school in relation to bullying issues. For these parents such concerns provoked fears that with no-one in control of the situation their child would continue to be bullied.

For example, Martin attributes the ongoing nature of the bullying of his daughter to the school's failure to provide a clear plan of action to resolve the situation. For Martin one of the most frustrating aspects of his reporting experience was the lack of information regarding what policies and processes the school had in place to respond to bullying situations. As far as he was aware the school did not provide parents with any such information either through printed materials or parent information evenings. Further, his attempts to question staff about their bullying policies only resulted in frustration as they responded with what he saw as 'rhetoric' about the school's 'individually tailored' approach to pastoral care, and which he suspected was intended to placate him:

And in fact it had the opposite effect, on me. Um, leading up to – I never lost my temper. Although at one point my wife put her hand on my arm, but I never lost my, I never let it get disagreeable. But I was, I was very intense about it. Especially when it came to um, rhetoric, such as, 'We are proud of our individual attention in this school, we pride ourselves on our attitude to social responsibility and guiding the children into' – you know, all this sort of rubbish. Which in principle is all very well, but it sounded like a sort of um, a script that they had read to parents in a similar situation before.

Far from placating him, this type of response only served to exacerbate Martin's fear that with no clear processes in place for dealing with incidents of bullying the school would do little to help his daughter.

Throughout his account Martin is highly critical of the lack of continuity in the school's approach to pastoral care generally. He tells how strategies put in place to support his daughter on one day were likely to collapse the next and 'the teachers either don't want to or haven't got the time or are too exhausted to do anything about it'. Although Martin acknowledges the pressures teachers are under, from his perspective the school's failure to provide a coordinated response to bullying is an abnegation of their responsibility as educators:

So in my weak moments I've said to myself they're overworked, they're etc.

But then, if in the rare moments where I allow myself to talk about it, as I am with you, um, I feel very strongly that it's their job. It's their job.

He compares the school's approach to bullying issues to that of a musician who does not play to a musical score but improvises as they go along and observes that with such an inconsistent approach he cannot see how the school will resolve the bullying:

And they may be improvising on the basis of experience, but that, experience doesn't matter in anything unless it has a long-term influence on outcomes, you know? Otherwise it's, experience is just what happened yesterday the day before or 50 years ago. You know, it doesn't, it's meaningless...There's no, there's no um, perceptible path into the future. We don't see any, any path that the school has got to deal with this sort of thing.

Similarly, in her account Eve questions the ability of school staff to respond effectively to bullying situations. As noted previously, a key theme in Eve's account is her fear that by reporting the bullying her daughter was experiencing she would only make things worse. It is with some anguish that she tells how, at both schools her daughter attended, the bullying had escalated after she brought it to the attention of staff. In both cases Eve attributes this to the ineffective interventions made by school staff. When she spoke to the class teacher at Jade's previous school about how she was being excluded in the playground, the teacher suggested that Jade should try to include herself more in her classmates' games. However, Eve is highly critical of the onus the teacher placed on Jade to alter her behaviour to solve the problem with no acknowledgement of the role her classmates played in actively excluding her from their games. Further, she tells how the strategies the teacher suggested were ineffective and only resulted in Jade being humiliated further:

What her teacher at the time, said was, 'Don't ask the others if you can play. Just include yourself and involve yourself.'...Um, it didn't, it didn't work. That's right, it didn't work because they'd say, 'Did you ask?' And so she'd ask the person who made up the game, and then the person who'd made up the game would say, 'No. No, you can't play.' And she'd be excluded anyway. So she had tried to do that.

The teacher then attempted to manage the situation by raising it directly with Jade's classmates. However, in Eve's view this worsened the situation as the girls resented the negative attention they thought Jade had caused them and began to bully her more covertly:

So um, oh the reason why it didn't work well with the teacher, because she then brought the girls in individually, and tried to talk to the girls individually and um, and that's where it um, it all got nasty behind the scenes in the playground.

As discussed previously, Eve was also highly critical of the way in which staff at Jade's new school in Tasmania responded to her reports of bullying. She tells how after raising the matter with the Principal she was hopeful that he would use his authority to resolve the problem: 'He said he was going to do everything within his power to you know, get on top of this.' However, she was extremely disappointed when Jade described the ineffective approach he took when he raised the issue with students:

He then called a big, called a talk with all the kids in the multipurpose room and um, now God love him, he tried his best, but it just didn't go over. The man used the softest loveliest voice: 'Now everybody, it's come to my attention that there's been a bit of a problem, and we are going to talk about this.' It was all soft and fluffy and the kids are rolling their eyes, and just, you know, and Jade said, she just shook her head you know, at the dinner table when we were talking about it.

Although Eve acknowledges that the Principal acted with 'the best of intentions', in her view the approach he took was not only ineffective, but also contributed to an escalation of the bullying:

The way in which he did that was not a way in which it had the impact that was needed. What it needed was a big stern strong voice to come in there and say, 'You know what? I'm not a happy Principal!' And that was not what happened. It was the opposite of that. And as a consequence, it, it had the opposite effect. Because, because then what was happening is the girls

were then saying, ‘Oh because of you, we had to have the big talk didn’t we?’
You know? And really nastily, you know. So it wasn’t long after that that the
big incident happened where, they just went too far.

In this way, Eve’s account resonates with the sense that no-one is in control, which Frank describes as a key feature of the chaos narrative. Her disappointment at the lack of expertise demonstrated by the Principal in managing the bullying stands in direct contrast to the high regard for the professionalism of school staff which was expressed by parents who told their stories as restitution narratives.

Similarly, in her account Amanda questioned the ability of staff at her daughter’s school to manage incidents of bullying. As noted previously, Amanda was critical of the way in which some teachers at the school seemed to ignore incidents of bullying; thereby sending a message to students that such behaviour is acceptable. However, she observes that even when teachers acknowledge that bullying is occurring they do not always know how to stop it. For example, she tells how one teacher was aware of the bullying Freya was experiencing and tried to help, but did not seem to know how to manage the situation:

I got from this teacher at the time, she didn’t know what to do, a little bit.
But not that she was lazy and not that she was ignoring it. But that she
actually didn’t know what to do with this group of sort of pre-teen, scary
kind of, a lot of extreme and intense girls with extreme intense feelings, and
a lot of silliness as well.

Further, Amanda suggests that a lack of expertise might also explain the disappointing response she received from the Principal during their meeting: ‘I look back and I think, I don’t think she knew what to do, because she didn’t tell us, she did not say she’d do a thing.’ In Amanda’s view, the Principal demonstrated a

disappointing lack of leadership with regard to the issue of bullying and contrasts this with the strong stance against bullying which was taken by a new Principal who came to the school the following year. She credits the new Principal with having created a 'massive' change in the culture of the school by making it clear to students that he would not tolerate bullying:

I had this very interesting conversation with Freya about a month ago, or maybe more, but she said, 'There's not as much bullying now'. And I realised at that moment, I looked at her and I realised we hadn't been under the same stress about bullying for ages, for a long time...And she said, 'The new Principal, he hates bullying.' And I thought, 'Wow, ever since this new Principal came there's been hardly any bullying at the school'. And it seems to me just that this man, this new Principal hates bullying, wants to talk about it, doesn't want it in the school, will not have it in the school. That's what she kept saying: 'It's just not allowed. It's just not OK, with him.'

You Doubt Yourself

As noted previously, chaos narratives can be difficult to listen to because they frustrate expectations of narrative sequencing and a resolution to the story. However, perhaps the most unsettling aspect of the chaos narrative is the lack of agency it affords to the storyteller and the implications this has for their sense of self. According to Frank those who tell chaos narratives define themselves as being 'swept along without control by life's fundamental contingency' (p. 102). In this way, the chaos narrative undermines the storyteller's sense of themselves as an active agent in the world. Thus, stories told as chaos narratives are characterised by the expression of doubts or anxieties about the self. As Frank

notes, 'just as the chaos narrative is an anti-narrative, so it is a non-self-story' (p. 105).

In this study many parents expressed a sense of powerlessness as they recounted their experiences of reporting bullying to their child's school. For these parents the ineffective response they received from the school provoked anxiety not only about their child's safety at school but also about their own abilities as a parent. A key theme in these parents' stories was the fear that they were failing in their primary duty as parent to protect their child from harm. In addition, the lack of acknowledgement that they received from the school of the validity of their reports of bullying caused some parents to doubt their own judgement, thus undermining their confidence to act in their child's best interests. Some also voiced fears that they may have contributed to their child becoming a likely target for bullying through faults or inadequacies in their parenting. For these parents the trauma of witnessing their child's suffering was compounded by the incapacitating effects of doubting themselves as a parent.

Throughout his account Martin portrays himself as powerless to protect his daughter from being bullied at school. The lack of agency and sense of trepidation he feels in the situation is clear when he describes it as being, 'like walking on eggshells'. Early on in his account Martin positions himself as someone who is somewhat unsure of himself in his role as a parent. He notes that as Angela is his 'first and only child' he did not have much experience to guide him in dealing with her difficulties at school. He explains how hard it was to piece together information about the problems she was having with her peers and to know what to do about it. At one point he observes ruefully that 'there's no such thing as being professionally trained as a parent'. As Angela became more

and more distressed by her experiences at school Martin sought advice from mental health professionals. He describes the reassurance he derived from having some professional expertise to guide him:

Because we have found comfort in the fact that there is someone, that there is a professional involved who actually seems to know what they're doing. I don't know whether that's my own, you know, my own background and upbringing that has respect for that kind of, but it certainly, I suppose it's like having a good doctor for physical ailments. It's like saying to a neighbour or to a friend, 'Well maybe you should see a doctor about that'. You know there is a certain gravitas about having some sort of professional backing. So, their help is beyond just the counselling, it's also for us to know that they're there.

In this way, Martin's account evokes aspects of the restitution narrative in which the storyteller looks to professionals to provide a remedy to their problems. He tells how he invited Angela's psychologist to attend the formal meeting at the school to provide him with some 'professional backing' in outlining the risks posed to Angela's mental health by the bullying she was experiencing at school. However, he was extremely dismayed when the Principal did not seem to listen to the psychologist's advice:

They don't want to listen, they don't want to have the opinions of the professionals. They are not interested in the parent who comes to them with professionals in tow, and have them confirm what the parent is saying.

For Martin, such a lack of deference to professional advice was shocking and a significant blow to his hopes that the school would finally recognise the severity of the situation. Related to this is the distress he felt when his own

standing as a management professional was not recognised by the Principal during the meeting. Although Martin describes himself as being somewhat out of his depth as the parent of a teenage girl, throughout his account he positions himself as someone who is confident in his abilities as an experienced manager. He describes how, drawing on his many years of experience of facilitating meetings, he had carefully compiled some research relating to bullying and a list of issues for discussion during the meeting. He tells how, at the start of the meeting, he handed around these papers ‘in sort of meeting style’. However, he was indignant when the Principal made a condescending joke about the amount of preparation he had done: ‘I expected him at least to have recognised that someone was on the same um management role, and not at all.’ In Martin’s view the Principal’s joke was intended to position him as an ‘over intense parent’ and to undermine the gravity of his concerns.

The frustration Martin feels at having his concerns dismissed by the school is a recurring theme in his account. At one point he tells me that some of the things he has said to me he has already said to the school, ‘but it’s impossible to get a sense of engagement about it’. In particular, he is frustrated by the school’s denial that what Angela was experiencing was bullying, and their insistence that he should not call it so:

And it was um, it was said in a quite dismissive way, in quite a – the implication was, you know, ‘You are not really in a professional position to have an opinion about what bullying is, or isn’t.’ And that was actually stated.

Thus, Martin positions himself as someone who has been silenced by the school, thus evoking a key element of the chaos narrative in which the storyteller is denied a voice to name their suffering. Further, he tells how the school's failure to acknowledge the bullying has caused him to 'think defensively' as a parent. Although he argues strongly that the bullying directed towards Angela has its causes in the culture of the school, and in society more broadly, he also wonders if Angela might be the type of child who attracts bullying through faults in her character. In Martin's view this is a harmful way of thinking which undermines his confidence in himself as a parent, and for which the school is responsible:

I don't know if there is a correlation – no, there's not – I was going to say, you wonder whether kids who are sensitive invite this sort of behaviour from more confident children. In other words, whether there is a 'type' of victim, whether there is a character type. And, in a way it doesn't matter whether there is or not, it's bad enough. But if parents start to wonder that kind of thing, it's harmful. It's the school is responsible for me thinking about that kind of stuff in a defensive kind of way.

Although Martin resists the notion that Angela is somehow to blame for the bullying, he worries that to argue the point further with the school would be counter-productive, since it would most likely be taken as evidence that he is indeed an 'over-intense parent' and therefore part of the problem. Having reached such an impasse, Martin feels unable to act on behalf of his daughter and describes the outlook for her as bleak:

So the bullying continues, but Angela's sensitivity to it increases. But there's, there's nothing we can, there's nothing we can do about it other than go to the school when it gets to a critical stage and say, 'This is what's

happening, at this moment.’ And they say, ‘Well this is what we’ll do, at this moment.’ But then the following week, or indeed even the following day, um, it will happen again.

Like Martin, Eve and Amanda also told of their mounting frustration and despair as their child experienced bullying over a period of years with no effective intervention from the school. Both felt torn between their desire to protect their child and concerns about how they would be perceived by the school if they persisted in reporting incidents of bullying. Both also expressed anguish at the thought that by hesitating to approach the school about the bullying they had failed to protect their child from harm. However, in contrast to Martin, both Eve and Amanda tell how they resisted the apparent hopelessness of their child’s situation and were eventually able to take action on behalf of their child. In framing their experiences in this way, they claim a more agentic role for themselves as parents than that which is offered by the chaos narrative.

As discussed previously, a key theme in Eve’s account was her reluctance to contact the school about the bullying Jade was experiencing. She presents this reluctance as an indication of her character and reflects on the implications it has for her role as an advocate for her child:

I didn’t feel um, comfortable in just running to the school saying, ‘I’ve got a problem here with my child. My child is being bullied’. And you know, yeah, I guess I’m not that kind of person. You know, I know there would be lots of parents that would that would just you know, at the moment there is an incident say, ‘No!’ and go and deal with it.

Eve also tells how her reluctance to engage with the school about the bullying was compounded by the ineffective responses she received to her initial

reports of bullying. She tells how staff failed to acknowledge that Jade was being bullied and suggested that Jade's own behaviour was the source of the problem. Further, Eve felt that the implication was that there were problems with her parenting which had caused Jade to become the type of person who had difficulty 'fitting in' at school:

That's what makes me want to cry - is you feel this, I must, it's like *we* must be doing something wrong as parents. Or she must be not, um, - Why can't she fit in with the other girls? Why can't she? You know, I mean, she's absolutely lovely, you know? Yeah, yeah, you do, there's that problem there where you feel this inadequacy of not being normal and being able to conform because you've got this, you're an outer, on the - you know, 'Can I, can I play?' type thing. Like you know not actively, and that, that, is the very uncomfortableness that I had with the teacher. That's, that's the crux of it. It's hard to put into words but that's what it is: There's something wrong with *me*.

Here, Eve shows how the response she received from the school to her reports of bullying posed a significant threat to her sense of herself as a parent. Fearing that she may be labelled a 'problem parent', Eve hesitated to report the bullying again. She tells how she did not contact school again until the situation had reached crisis point. Eve feels that 'by waiting too long' before she contacted the school again she failed her daughter and left her vulnerable to further bullying. When Jade was physically attacked at school, Eve decided that she needed to 'step up to the plate as a mother' and advocate more strongly with the school. Even though Jade protested, Eve insisted that she needed to go to the school again:

She'd be, 'No Mummy, no Mummy, no'...Then I've said, 'No, that's it!'

This is when I've said, 'I'm sorry, this is what Mummy is doing. Mummy is going to *fix* this. It's not going to happen anymore honey.'

Eve tells how she met with the Principal and demanded that the parents of the girls who had attacked Jade be informed. She also threatened to report the bullying to the Department of Education if he did not 'do something more' to bring an end to it. In Eve's view, it was only after she became more demanding that the Principal became actively involved and things began to improve for Jade at school:

Me threatening, putting a threat saying, 'I want, I want the parents involved', you know, and putting the pressure on really made them tighten up and say, 'Ok, no more willy nilly.' He was out there every day, the Principal, after that, in the lunch ground, in the lunch, you know. And the kids could see he was watching. So all of – they are starting to think, 'Oh, pull back a bit, tone it down', you know. And a combination of all the things going and it, it pulled the reins in on it. Things began to get better.

In this way, Eve represents her meeting with the Principal as a major turning point in her story, when she overcame the self-doubt which had prevented her from approaching the school and was able to advocate strongly on behalf of her daughter. Similarly, in Amanda's account it is also her meeting with the Principal that signals an important shift in the type of agency she claims for herself. She tells how, prior to this meeting, she had struggled to take a decisive role in responding to the bullying as she and Freya argued back and forth about whether or not to report it to the school. She reflects that during this period she

found it difficult to be the ‘grown up’ in their relationship by going against her daughter’s wishes:

And I feel I was listening to her a lot, I know that, and I know that I was doing what *she* wanted me to do. So if she didn’t want me to talk to the teacher I wouldn’t. Because I wanted to go in everyday that she would come home and say this. But in retrospect I wish I had kind of at that moment realised I was the parent and she was the child and she was in pain. And I couldn’t possibly, I had to actually be grown up and take on that I had to do something that she didn’t like.

Amanda explains that when she finally decided to go and see the Principal about the bullying she did so because she felt that she needed some ‘adult support’ to solve the problem and was looking to the Principal to ‘take responsibility’ for it. As discussed previously, she was bitterly disappointed with the outcome of this meeting and the lack of direction provided by the Principal. Further, she was angered by the Principal’s response which seemed to imply that Freya was responsible for the causing the problem. Although Amanda rejected this interpretation of the situation as a form of ‘victim blaming’, it also had some salience for her as she wondered what part Freya may have played in attracting the bullying. In particular, she wondered if the trauma surrounding her breakup with Freya’s father may have contributed to Freya’s difficulties with her peers:

So I knew that she had these horrible feelings inside. Like a lot of unresolved pain about her parents’ situation. And I would wonder is she going to school and is she unable to leave behind those negative emotional feelings? Is she, is that somehow colouring how she expects her relationships to be? Is she causing this? Is she constructing a negative relationship because that’s what she thinks will happen in life?

Amanda tells how such concerns had caused her to delay contacting the school about the bullying. She describes how, rather than reporting each new incident, she had spent a great deal of time questioning Freya and analysing what she might have done to cause her classmates to behave in the way they had. She would then try to advise Freya about what she should and should not have done in each case, which only resulted in further arguments between them. Reflecting on this she describes the guilt she feels for having allowed the situation to continue for so long without taking decisive action:

I was just as guilty as some of the other people, because I wasn't, I wasn't doing anything. This poor girl was coming home telling her one person that is supposed to make her safe, me and I didn't. There was a while I didn't protect her. And that makes me feel very, very emotional. But I did, thank God, sort of redeem myself so that I don't feel so terrible.

Although Amanda was disappointed with the outcome of her meeting with the Principal, she tells how it provided the impetus for her to take a more active role in defending Freya. She describes how angry she felt walking away from the meeting when she was presented with the opportunity to confront some of the girls who had been bullying Freya. Amanda describes this exchange in highly dramatic terms. She tells of a 'real human to human battle' in which she insisted that the girls acknowledge, and were accountable for, the acts of bullying they had each directed towards Freya. While Amanda does not attribute the cessation of the bullying entirely to these actions, in her view the very public stance she took against the bullying during this exchange did result in some positive changes for Freya in the way she was treated by her peers:

There are some of them that have changed, changed their manner towards her completely. It was like, it was like something very bad was going on and had been accepted, and someone just walked in and said, 'Hey, this is going on, this is bad.' And made them all defend it or deny it or acknowledge it, something.

For Amanda, the significance of the actions she took that day goes beyond the effect they had on the bullying. In her view, it was only by standing up for her daughter that she was able to alleviate some of the guilt she felt for her past inaction and 'redeem' herself as a parent. She describes the experience as 'extremely vindicating' and reflects on what it has taught her about the importance of making 'a stand' as a parent. In this way, Amanda departs from the lack of agency with which she represents herself in earlier sections of her account and resists the hopelessness of the chaos narrative.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how Martin, Eve and Amanda each gave accounts which evoke key elements of the chaos narrative. In particular, these parents describe feeling powerless as they struggled to have their reports of bullying taken seriously by their child's school. The lack of control they felt in this situation was exacerbated by the school's failure to provide clearly articulated policies and processes in response to bullying. Further, these parents describe how the lack of acknowledgment they received from the school served to undermine their confidence in themselves as parents. In Martin's account there is no respite from the frustration and despair he feels at his inability to protect his daughter from further bullying. By contrast, Eve and Amanda both represent the bullying their child experienced as a problem eventually resolved, at least in part,

through their own actions. However, they also emphasise the traumatic effects of witnessing their child suffer over a protracted period of time. Both express deep regret that they allowed the situation to continue for so long without taking a more assertive stance with the school. As noted previously, the power of the chaos narrative lies in the fear that anyone of us could potentially experience the same trauma and loss of control as the storyteller. As I will show in the following chapter, it is often just such a fear of failing in their duty as a parent which shapes how parents represent themselves in their accounts of reporting bullying to schools.

Chapter 8: Quest

Introduction

The third narrative type proposed by Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller* (2013), is the quest narrative in which illness is represented not as a disruption but as a journey through which something is gained. A distinguishing feature of the quest narrative is the strong sense of agency it affords the storyteller. According to Frank, 'quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and attempt to *use* it' (p. 115). In contrast to the restitution narrative in which illness is remedied by an agent external to the storyteller, and the chaos narrative which is characterised by a lack of agency, those who tell quest narratives claim a strong sense of agency for themselves as they recount how they met the challenge of illness. In this narrative type the storyteller positions themselves as the hero of their story and the plot revolves around how they were able to overcome or transform suffering.

However, Frank argues that there is a range of ways in which the role of hero is enacted within quest narratives with important differences in the claims storytellers make about the degree to which it is possible to exert control over future events. While some quest narratives focus on the actions taken to 'conquer' illness, others are concerned with finding 'alternative ways to experience suffering' and what may be learned in the process (p. 119). According to Frank, the quest narrative encompasses stories which seek predictability and control as well as those which accept life's contingency, and it is in this way that it crosses 'the postmodern divide' (p. 119).

As discussed previously, all of the parents who took part in this study told how they had sought assistance from their child's school to intervene in the bullying their child was experiencing, yet only a few attributed the resolution of the bullying to actions taken by the school. The majority told how, dissatisfied with the response they received from the school, they felt compelled to take further action themselves. These parents gave detailed accounts of a range of actions they took to intervene in the bullying including: spending more time at the school, speaking directly with the perpetrators or their parents, making a complaint to the police and, in a number of instances, removing their child from the school. Many of these parents claimed credit for having brought the bullying to an end through these actions. In this way their accounts evoke a key element of the quest narrative whereby the storyteller claims agency for themselves.

However, there is also diversity in the type of agency these parents claim for themselves. In these accounts parents gave voice to a range of ideas about how parents should respond to bullying and the extent to which it is possible for individual parents to guard their children against such experiences. While most told how they had managed to resolve the bullying, some also focussed on how they had helped their child navigate the experience and learn from it. Although they did not minimise the distress caused by the bullying, these parents viewed the experience as a journey through which their child had gained valuable knowledge and skills. The range of ways in which parents claim agency in these accounts demonstrates the complexity of the quest narrative as described by Frank. In particular, these accounts demonstrate the way in which the quest narrative encompasses differing and sometimes contradictory assumptions regarding the degree to which individuals are able to exert control over future events. However,

what is common to these accounts is the way in which the storyteller defines themselves through their actions. In telling how they met the challenges posed by the bullying of their child, these parents also give an account of who they take themselves to be as parents.

In this chapter I focus on the accounts of three parents: Teresa, Steve and Donna, each of whom was dissatisfied with the response they received from their child's school to their reports of bullying and had taken further action to resolve the issue. A key concern in this chapter is to trace the complexity in these accounts. Although these parents all drew on aspects of the quest narrative to frame their experiences, there are significant differences between their accounts in terms of the types of agency they claim for themselves. In what follows, I explore the different ways in which these parents position themselves as active agents as they tell how they responded to the bullying of their child. Further, I consider how they draw on different facets of the quest narrative in order to claim moral identities for themselves as parents.

A Journey

According to Frank the basic storyline of the quest narrative takes the form of a journey through which the storyteller finds purpose or meaning in their illness. The journey begins when the storyteller is alerted to some sign or symptom that all is not as it should be. Hearing this as a call to action, the storyteller takes on the role of a hero and embarks on a quest to resolve the problem. As part of the quest the storyteller undergoes a series of trials or challenges and eventually returns from their journey 'as one who is no longer ill but remains marked by illness' (p. 118.) The journey concludes as the storyteller reflects on how they

have changed and what they have learned through their experiences, often shared in the form of insights which may be helpful to others in similar situations. Although this basic storyline suggests a clear narrative arc with a beginning, middle and end, quest narratives are often complex and multi-layered. In part, this is because it is only by going back over what they have suffered that the storyteller comes to the realisation of what they have also gained through their experiences. As Frank observes, in these narratives ‘the meaning of the journey emerges recursively: the journey is taken in order to find out what sort of journey one has been taking’ (p. 117). As part of this process the storyteller recalls the hopes and fears which have shaped their journey, and in this way ‘both restitution and chaos remain background voices when quest is foreground’ (p. 115).

In this study, parents who framed their experiences in terms of a quest also drew on elements of restitution and chaos narratives to describe different phases of their journey. As discussed previously, all of the parents who took part in this study told how they had initially approached their child’s school with the expectation that the school would act to prevent further bullying of their child. In doing so they positioned themselves within a restitution narrative whereby problems are solved by an external agent. However, the majority of participants also drew on aspects of the chaos narrative as they described how the school had failed to resolve the bullying and they feared that the situation would spiral out of control with serious consequences for the wellbeing of their child. Teresa and Steve described how such fears prompted them to take further action to bring about a satisfactory resolution for their child, while Donna told how she was seriously considering the need to do so. Each of these parents gave complex accounts of their experiences which, although framed predominantly in terms of a

quest narrative, also function as a journey through restitution and chaos narratives as they evoke the hopes and fears they held along the way.

In her account, Teresa clearly positions herself as an active agent in resolving the bullying her daughter experienced at school. In Teresa's view, it was her own perseverance in continuing to report incidents to the school which had eventually brought the bullying to an end. In this way, she represents her experiences in terms of a quest to have the school recognise the bullying and act accordingly. At the same time, her account is underpinned by aspects of restitution and chaos narratives as she traces her journey through numerous attempts to have the school take her reports of bullying seriously.

At the time of our interview, Teresa's daughter Caitlin was in Year 6 at a Catholic school which she had attended since the start of the previous year. Teresa explains how she had chosen the school as part of a long-term 'educational program' which she planned for her daughter and hoped would provide a smooth transition between primary and secondary school, as well as support services to help Caitlin with some specific areas of learning difficulty. Teresa recalls how, soon after starting at the school, Caitlin began to be bullied by one particular classmate with whom she had initially been friends. In her account, Teresa details numerous ways in which the girl had caused Caitlin distress, including encouraging other children not to play with her and instigating games in which Caitlin was physically hurt.

Soon after she became aware of the problem Teresa raised it with Caitlin's class teacher who promised that she would 'keep an eye on the situation'. Despite this, the bullying behaviours continued, becoming more frequent and escalating in

severity. When Teresa discovered that the girl had falsely accused Caitlin of stealing she determined that she needed to be 'far more assertive with the school' and wrote a formal letter of complaint to Caitlin's teacher. Although the teacher investigated the incident, Teresa was dissatisfied with the outcome as the incident was not recognised as one of bullying and the girl received no specific consequences for her behaviour. Teresa goes on to describe a number of subsequent incidents which she had reported to the school and which she felt were handled 'very flippantly'. In particular, she was perturbed by the continued lack of sanctions placed on the girl even when the bullying was of a physical nature:

I was very dismayed about how um, gentle of an approach that was taken with regards to a physical abuse instance, that was admitted to...I was very surprised that there was no ah, recognition, that the children needed to be responsible for their actions and therefore show some sort of remorse or do something to educate them with regards to it not being appropriate behaviour.

Here, and elsewhere in her account, Teresa makes clear her expectation that the school should 'do something' to stop the bullying. In doing so she draws on underlying assumptions of the restitution narrative regarding the role of professionals in providing a remedy. However, she also demonstrates a lack of faith in the school to fulfil this role and is highly critical of the school's reliance on discussion and mediation to manage incidents of bullying. Teresa views the school's ineffective response to the bullying as a call to action and positions herself within a quest narrative as she describes how she searched for ways to resolve the problem.

At the same time, the voice of chaos is a constant undercurrent in Teresa's account as she remains mindful of the potential for interventions to go badly

wrong. Throughout her account Teresa stresses the importance of being strategic in her actions in order to avoid making the situation worse. For example, although she had ample opportunity to speak with the girl directly, Teresa decided against this in case it caused problems for her family in their local area: 'I didn't want for there to become a problem between the child's parent and me because we, both families live out in [name of area] which is small. And I didn't want for that to escalate.'

Teresa tells how she managed the situation by being 'as methodical and as administrative as possible'. She recorded each incident of bullying and any communication she had with the school about it on a spread sheet. By documenting events in this way Teresa hoped to demonstrate to the school that these were not isolated incidents but part of a repeated pattern of behaviour directed by this child towards Caitlin which should therefore be recognised as bullying. Keeping track of events in this way was also a crucial means by which Teresa maintained a sense of control in the face of emotionally trying circumstances:

And I know, that overreacting or being emotional is not necessarily going to help the situation. And you need to be methodical, and you need to have a plan, and you need to follow the plan, because if things go pear shaped at this point you can go back a step and redirect. So it's just trying to be as methodical and as administrative as possible. And then because, you know, you don't, you don't need to add emotion to an issue like this as well, because then it becomes very difficult to be able to manage and control.

For Teresa, the spread sheet functioned not only as a tool to manage the situation, but also as record of her own emotional journey as she continued to

advocate with the school on behalf of her daughter. She referred to the spread sheet frequently throughout her account, explaining each entry and reading aloud notes she had made regarding Caitlin's increasing levels of distress as the bullying continued. Prompted by these notes, Teresa recalls how difficult it was for her to witness her daughter's distress, all the while attempting to keep her own emotions in check so as not to upset Caitlin further: 'I have cried about this, and I don't need Caitlin to see that, because then she is going to think, "Oh, this is really bad!"'

After more than eight months of contact with the school about the bullying, Teresa received a phone call from the Principal to discuss the matter. The Principal was responding to an email Teresa had sent Caitlin's class teacher in which she formally requested that the teacher closely observe the interactions between the girls so that the school could 'finally recognise how this child is behaving'. The Principal informed Teresa that she would be monitoring the situation personally from now on and if things did not improve both girls would be excluded from certain extra-curricular activities.

Teresa was incensed that the Principal seemed to be implying that Caitlin was also 'an instigator' when she had received no previous indication from the school that this was the case. Nonetheless she was somewhat appeased to know that the Principal was now involved and had committed to weekly meetings with the girls. She says that from this point on the situation improved markedly and she had no further call to make entries on the spread sheet. According to Caitlin, the girl was 'being really nice now' even offering to help when she had too many things to carry on the bus. In Teresa's view this change had come about because

the Principal had now shown ‘an avid interest’ in the situation and ‘the bully now realises that she can’t move without it being seen’.

Although the bullying had stopped, Teresa notes some ongoing effects of the experience for both Caitlin and herself. She observes that Caitlin had learned some hard lessons about friendship and loyalty at a very young age, but had also learned the importance of ‘just being yourself’ to ‘attract the right people to you for the right reasons’. In this way, she represents the experience as having contributed to the development of Caitlin’s resilience and in doing so draws on a key element of the quest narrative whereby personal transformation is gained through adversity. For her part, Teresa was angry and resentful that it had taken ‘too many tries’ to get the school to ‘do something’ about the bullying. She also remained vigilant in case the bullying should begin again and explains that if it did she will be ‘right there’ ready to report any new incidents and record them on the spread sheet.

However, Teresa also reflects that the strong position she had taken in response to the bullying had not come without cost. She observes that since she started reporting the bullying there had been a significant change in the tenor of her relations with staff at the school:

I’ve also gone from, from being smiled at and helloed to at the school grounds to being ignored, by teachers, and by the Principal. And it’s like I don’t really care because I’m, I’m not, I’ve done nothing wrong, but it’s like I’ve been (laughter) quite seriously avoided.

While Teresa responds stoically to these social slights and considers them a small price to pay for ensuring the safety of her daughter at school, the injustice of the

situation still rankles. By highlighting this in her account, she evokes a further element of the quest narrative whereby the storyteller returns from their journey 'marked' in some way by what they have experienced. Just as Caitlin had learned through her experiences that 'the world is not a perfect place', Teresa feels she has been let down by the school which she had so carefully chosen for her daughter. In addition, she feels that she must continue to steel herself against the disapproval she encounters from staff in order to 'do what is right' and advocate on behalf of her daughter if necessary.

Similarly, in his account Steve tells how he played an active role in bringing an end to the bullying his son was experiencing at school, but had also paid a personal price in doing so. In particular, Steve reflects on the conflict he experienced with another parent after speaking out about the bullying and how 'let down' he feels by the school's poor handling of the situation. In this way, Steve positions himself within a quest narrative as one who has achieved their goal but returns from the journey carrying injuries from the trials they have endured along the way. Further, Steve's account demonstrates a tension between restitution and quest narratives as he attempts to find a way to work in partnership with the school without relinquishing his own sense of agency in managing the situation.

At the time of our interview, Steve's son Brendan was in Year 6 at a Catholic school which he had attended since Kindergarten. Throughout his account Steve stresses the close association he and his family have had with the school over many years. All of his children attended the school and both Steve and his wife had volunteered extensively at the school. In this way, Steve positions himself as a person of some standing and influence within the school community. In his account he tells how, for a brief period during the previous

year, Brendan had been bullied by a group of five boys who called him ‘very derogatory names’ and, in one instance, had also physically harmed him. Steve points out that prior to this Brendan had not encountered any bullying at school. Further, he says that he does not understand why the boys had chosen to target Brendan as he is not ‘the type’ who would normally attract such behaviour:

That’s what was so surprising to us: ‘Why are these boys picking on Brendan? Because he is one who will fight back.’ I mean I always thought bullying was about picking on the quiet one, the one that won’t fight back, that you’ve got the power over. Well, they chose the wrong person. They chose the wrong family.

Here, Steve draws on notions of bullying as pathological behaviour which can be attributed to personal deficits of individual children including those who are victimised and he strongly resists the idea that his son may have attracted the bullying through his own personal weakness. He emphasises his son’s fighting spirit which he sees as a particular trait in his family and which is also a key feature of how Steve describes his own response to the bullying.

Steve tells how, when he and his wife first learned of the bullying, they advised Brendan to ‘fight back’ as a way of deterring the bullies. When this tactic failed they quickly decided that they needed to report the bullying to the school: ‘Because we knew we would have to do something. It was not acceptable, what was happening.’ Further, Steve tells how their decision to contact the school was reinforced by reports in the media about the long-term mental health effects of bullying on victims and the associated risk of self-harm:

And when we saw all this was happening at the same time, we said well, it just reinforced our view, 'We have to do something about this'. Now in actual fact I think we even raised that with the school: 'You have to do something. There is stuff in the paper now, coming out, that if you don't do something about it 30 years on it's still affecting people.'

Steve and his wife made an appointment to see the Deputy Principal and prepared carefully for the meeting, taking with them a written statement from Brendan outlining the bullying he had experienced. According to Steve, the Deputy Principal was 'very responsive' during the meeting and gave a clear explanation of the steps the school would take to investigate the bullying. When Steve phoned her a week later, he was told that the class teacher had confirmed that Brendan had been bullied by a group of boys who had now been 'spoken to'. However, Steve tells how uncomfortable he felt just leaving the matter there: 'I didn't want to just leave it be or be like alright, I'd done with it, it's all finished now.' He told the Deputy Principal that he expected that if the bullying continued the perpetrators would be expelled from the school. He also insisted that the parents of the perpetrators should be informed of their children's behaviour. When he realised that the school had not done this he feared that the bullying would most likely continue beyond the school gates:

And if the parents don't know about it, I don't think the school will be adequately able to solve the problem, because the problem won't just exist in the school playground. They might be looking after the kids from 9 – 3, but certainly in the environment that we're in, it was in existence elsewhere because they all did sport together. Um, and, so I think you've got to work together. And I felt that I was let down by the school. I felt that was what they should have done.

From Steve's perspective, it was vital that school regard him as an active partner in responding to the bullying and that he be fully informed about the progress and outcome of his complaint. He was therefore extremely frustrated when the Deputy Principal refused to provide him with any further details about what actions the school had taken to intervene in the bullying, telling him that 'privacy laws' prevented her from doing so. Without knowing exactly what the school had done, Steve felt he could not be certain that the problem was solved. Even though Brendan had not reported any further incidents, Steve suspected that the boys may simply have moved on to another target: 'But I didn't want it to move on to somebody else, because that's not solving the problem.' For Steve, such uncertainty was unacceptable and he decided to use his influence at a local sporting club to ensure that the bullying stopped:

I thought, 'Well I'm going to break these kids up, where I can.' So I got involved, I was already involved, but I got more involved in [name of sporting club]. It's not a school team but a lot of the kids from the school go there. And we had, I ensured that this year that the troublemakers went to the other team. Even though I'm not the coach or anything, I got my way. So I split them up, even though the issue had sort of gone away now. But I did what I could in my power.

Steve also describes how he took the opportunity to speak with three of the boys at local sporting events, indirectly letting them know that he was aware of the bullying and that he would be watching them carefully. In addition he spoke with the father of another boy who had been involved in the bullying. The father had suspected that his son was in trouble at school but had not heard anything directly from the school, so he asked Steve if he knew what was going on.

Although he felt uneasy doing so, Steve told the father about his son's involvement in the bullying. While Steve says he cannot be certain that any of these actions put a stop to the bullying, in the absence of any further information from the school, he feels that in all likelihood they did:

I had involvement with talking to three of the five...And then one of the parents. So that's why I felt that I solved it. Factually I can't say that I did, but I felt that I did. And hence I felt the school didn't. Or if they did they didn't tell me, they didn't tell me the process and I felt let down by what happened.

Here, Steve positions himself within a quest narrative as he attributes the resolution of the bullying to his own actions. However, it is important to note the ambivalence with which he does so. In Steve's view it was not his role to inform other parents about their children's behaviour and he blames the school for putting him in such a difficult position by failing to communicate openly with parents about the bullying: 'I know I went and did something, and it stopped. I don't think I probably should have had to do that in the first place.'

In this way, Steve's account demonstrates a tension between the restitution narrative in which agency is external to the storyteller and the quest narrative in which the storyteller claims agency for themselves. Although he had approached the school for assistance, Steve was unwilling to relinquish his own sense of control over the situation. When the school failed to keep him fully informed, Steve felt compelled to take further action to ensure that the situation was under control. However, at the same time he was uneasy about striking out on his own and laments the lack of a sense of partnership between himself and the school:

I felt that we should be working together on this. Whereas the school said they wanted to do it all, all themselves. And that's not how I would have liked to have seen it done, um because it's not just bullying when they are at school because they have these after school activities...And it spills over into that. So I would have liked to have jointly, and then jointly is keeping everybody informed about everything.

Although the bullying directed towards Brendan had only lasted a short period of time, Steve, like Teresa, sees ongoing effects of the difficulties he experienced while advocating on behalf of his child. He is particularly saddened by the loss of friendship he suffered after speaking out about the bullying. He tells how the father he told about the bullying had subsequently approached the school for more information, only to be told by the Deputy Principal that his son had not been involved in any bullying. Steve sees this denial by the school as a significant betrayal of trust and he blames the school for costing him the friendship:

The bloke won't even talk to me after that now. Because he basically says I was lying about it. So that really disappointed me that the school was not honest enough to tell him that yes his son was involved... And I'm just like, 'If that's the way you are going to be.' You know, if that's how someone wants to be, that's the way want they want to be. But it was caused by the school.

In addition, Steve describes how the experience has changed the way he and his wife view themselves in relation to the school. Throughout his account Steve emphasises his family's close association with the school, describing how he and his wife have been 'heavily involved' at the school through committee

work and other voluntary activities. However, both now feel a sense of estrangement from the school. Steve tells how his wife is particularly angered by the school's poor handling of the situation and as a result now feels less inclined to spend time volunteering at the school:

She's like, 'Well, I spend all this time at the school and the one time we need assistance they weren't there to help us. Well I'm that disappointed in the school I'm going to tell them that I'm going to stop.' So she withdrew some of the help, the free help that she used to give them.

For his part, Steve describes himself as someone who will 'forgive and forget' and says that he wants to 'move on' from the issue. He is relieved that, as far as he can determine, the bullying did stop. However, he remains extremely frustrated by the lack of feedback he received from the school and states adamantly that he did not receive 'satisfaction' with regards to his complaint:

We've lodged a complaint and I can tell you we've never got satisfaction. I don't know if it's been solved or not, from being advised by the school... In a lot of other cases if you go to a complaints tribunal, they would investigate it and they would report back. And they would report back with an outcome. So you know all the way through – you might not know all the way through the process but you would get something at the end saying this is what happened, and this is the outcome and here's why. That hasn't happened.

In recounting their experiences, Teresa and Steve both draw on understandings of bullying as a problem which, with the proper management, can be solved. Both tell how through their own efforts they had managed to bring about a resolution to the bullying their child was experiencing. By contrast, in her account, Donna presents bullying as a complex issue which cannot always be

solved. For Donna, the challenge is not to overcome the bullying her son experiences but to equip him with the personal qualities and skills he needs to cope with such negative life experiences. In this way, her account resonates with the transformative aspect of quest narratives in which the storyteller views adversity as an opportunity for learning and growth. However, Donna also questions if such an approach can continue to be effective within an increasingly time-pressured school environment and wonders if she now needs to take a stronger stance with the school.

At the time of our interview, Donna's son Ben was in Year 5 at a government school in a rural area which he had attended since Kindergarten. In her account, Donna recalls a number of different bullying situations which Ben had experienced over the past few years and which she had reported to the school with varying outcomes. She also reflects on her experiences of reporting bullying during her elder son's time at the school some years before. While Teresa and Steve both focus on episodes of bullying which took place within a particular period of time and construct accounts which follow a sequence of events, Donna builds a more layered account of her experiences of reporting bullying as she switches back and forth in time over more than a decade as a parent at the school. The effect of this is that in Donna's account bullying is presented not as a notable event which departs from the normal conditions of schooling but as a regrettably common feature of school life for which she has developed a usual method of response. She tells how her preferred approach to reporting bullying is to first 'open up a dialogue' with the teacher to try and understand more about the context in which the bullying is taking place:

The teachers are always my first line of inquiry because I like to open up a dialogue so that I can understand, there's more than just one story behind the bullying. Um, my son is a very gentle natured person and largely tells the truth. And these kinds of things he's always truthful about, but I still do like to understand the other side of what's going on. So I go and see the teacher as a first port of call, to make sure about what's going on in the classroom dynamic. And if I'm not satisfied with that I will go and see the Assistant Principal and talk about the wider dynamic about what's going on and try to bring that all together and come up with some sort of solution for my son.

It is important to note that the 'solution' Donna seeks for her son does not generally involve punishment or consequences for individual perpetrators of bullying, but focuses on helping him cope with the situation by gaining an understanding of the factors which may cause people to behave in such ways rather than taking it too personally: 'People come to be this way because of their own set of reasons. Not because they want to target you personally, often. But because of their own set of reasons.' She recalls how she was able to use this approach to good effect when Ben was in Year 3 and was being physically bullied by one of his classmates. She describes how she spoke with his teacher at the time who was able to provide some insight as to why the child might have been behaving aggressively at school:

So we could talk to the teacher. She talked to us about the other child and we came together with our son and talked to him about where he could go with this and what was happening in that other child's life that might make him do that, and how to understand that.

In Donna's view there is always a 'learning opportunity' for children in these kinds of experiences through which they can develop skills and

understandings which will help them not only in their current situation but also once they leave school, because ‘how you teach your kids to deal with these people is how they are going to deal with people in real life’. In this way, Donna frames her response to the bullying as part of a broader intention to provide her son with a moral education. Further, she hopes that by taking such an approach she is teaching him how to find personal growth through adversity: ‘I hope we are giving him the skills to deal with negative experiences appropriately, and to have positive outcomes for himself.’

From this perspective, Donna’s account concurs with transformative aspects of the quest narrative and the assumption that through suffering there is something valuable to be gained. However, the voice of chaos is also present in her account as she fears that in the current school environment such an approach may run the risk of leaving her son too vulnerable. Donna explains that the success of her approach is highly dependent on the strength of her relationship with individual teachers and their willingness and capacity to attend to each child’s side of the story. She worries that increasing pressures on teachers over recent years mean that they often do not have the time or resources to fully engage in such a process and she fears that parents’ verbal reports of bullying are often overlooked and ‘things get lost in the ether’.

Donna observes that since the retirement of his trusted Year 3 teacher, Ben does not feel that there are any teachers at the school he can rely on for help if he is being bullied. She goes on to describe a number of recent instances in which she had reported bullying to teachers in person and received little or no follow-up. In one instance, some of Ben’s classmates had destroyed his prized book of drawings. Donna tells how she went to the class teacher and asked for more

information about what had happened and why. In contrast to her earlier experiences of reporting bullying at the school, Donna was extremely disappointed by the ineffective response she received from this teacher:

And she never found out. Yep, she never found out. There was no um, no talking to these children about what they'd done, there was no response to me. And that was one situation where I felt I should have put it in writing. She was very ineffectual, through the whole experience, it was very disappointing.

Here, Donna considers the need to take a more formal approach to the issue by putting her reports of bullying in writing. By doing so she believes that the school will be forced to provide her with a response: 'There's due process, yeah. They have to deal with it I suppose. As with most things these days if you put it in writing there's a response.'

As noted previously, Donna's preferred approach when responding to incidents of bullying is to talk informally with teachers to try and understand the broader context in which incidents take place. However, given her recent experiences, she now feels that she needs to take a more formal approach and report any future incidents in writing:

Which I (sigh), yeah, which is something that I just have to do. I don't like to do things like that because it sets in motion a set of practices that aren't always necessarily about resolution. It can be a number of other things, you know, but if that's the way that it has to be done, that's the way it has to be done to get satisfaction for Ben.

While Donna is reluctant to take such an approach with the school, she sees that in the current school climate something new is required of her if she is to

successfully advocate on behalf of her son. In this way she positions herself as someone who, along with her son, must be open to change in order to navigate the experiences life brings her way. From this perspective, the sense of a journey in Donna's account is ongoing as she considers how she can adapt to best support her son in a rapidly changing school environment.

I Solved It

As noted previously, a distinguishing feature of the quest narrative is the strong sense of agency it affords the storyteller. In these narratives, the storyteller positions themselves as the hero of their story and tells how they acted to bring about a resolution to the problem at hand. According to Frank, the quest narrative, 'speaks from the ill person's perspective and holds chaos at bay' (p. 115). The quest narrative can therefore be seen to reflect a modernist concern with predictability and control akin to that of the restitution narrative. As Frank notes, within a modernist world view suffering is regarded as 'a puzzle to be "controlled" if not eradicated' (p. 146). However, Frank argues that the quest narrative also encompasses a postmodern acceptance of contingency which allows the storyteller to remain 'open to crisis as a source of change and growth' (p. 126). It follows that, in quest narratives a sense of agency is not necessarily dependent on 'conquering' negative experiences but may also be enacted through seeking 'alternative ways to experience suffering' (p. 119).

In this study, many parents gave accounts which present a complex interplay between these different aspects of the quest narrative. The majority positioned themselves within a modernist version of the quest narrative as they claimed responsibility for resolving the bullying and restoring a sense of order to

their child's life at school. However, at the same time parents also often acknowledged the growth and learning their child had undergone as a result of their experiences with bullying. Some also reflected on how they had grown in themselves as a parent as they 'stepped up' to the challenge of advocating on behalf of their child. In this way, many parents gave accounts which resonate with the transformative aspects of the quest narrative. However, few parents enacted a sense of agency which aligns with a postmodern acceptance of contingency as the 'the only real certainty' (p. 126). For the most part, parents struggled against the uncertainty posed by the bullying their child experienced and their claims of agency were predicated on their ability to maintain a sense of control in the face of potential chaos.

In their accounts, Teresa and Steve both emphasise the part they played in bringing an end to the bullying their child was experiencing. In doing so, both draw on a modernist version of the quest narrative in which primacy is given to how the storyteller was able to meet and overcome the challenges presented by the problem at hand. Although the threat of potential chaos is also present in their accounts, there is little of the self-doubt which caused Eve and Amanda to delay taking a stronger stance with their child's school, as described in the previous chapter. Throughout their accounts both Teresa and Steve position themselves as highly capable advocates who will do what is necessary to ensure a satisfactory outcome for their child. For example, Teresa begins by establishing her knowledge of definitions of bullying and the types of behaviour which constitute bullying. She explains that she had gained this knowledge while serving as the parent representative on a committee to develop an anti-bullying policy at her children's former school:

So I was understanding the principles with regards to what is bullying, and what is not bullying. So that gave me a very clear idea with regards to what is and what isn't. Ah, and that also helped me to um talk with my kids when they felt that they were being 'bullied' in inverted commas, and explaining to them the difference, because one-off instances are not being bullied.

By prefacing her account in this way, Teresa positions herself as someone who is well qualified to make an assessment about whether or not the behaviours directed towards her daughter should be regarded as bullying or simply a case of conflict between two classmates. She emphasises that when she approached the school to make a complaint she had not done so for 'flippant reasons' but because she had evidence of a pattern of repeated intentionally hurtful behaviour which should therefore be recognised as bullying. Further, Teresa expresses strong views about how the school should respond to these incidents. She is highly critical of the school's reliance on discussion and mediation to manage bullying situations and sees a need for a more structured system of monitoring, warnings and consequences:

It's their policy that is probably falling down. They don't have a procedure. They need to follow a set rule of engagement with regards to how they deal with um, a bullying incident, bullying when it's been brought to the attention of the school.

When the school fails to respond adequately to her initial reports of bullying, Teresa quickly decides that she needs to be 'far more assertive with the school' and it is at this point that she begins keeping a record of each incident and her communications with the school about them. As noted previously, Teresa presents this method of keeping track of events as the major means by which she

maintains control of the situation. She claims that it was only by taking such a ‘methodical’ approach and reporting each incident to the school that she was eventually able to bring about a resolution to the problem and so avert serious damage to her daughter’s mental health and capacity to learn:

And I’m not going to go, I’m not going to um, like a lot of parents, go, ‘Oh what’s the point in saying anything because they’ll do nothing.’ I, I’m so opposite to that. I will keep doing something until something is done. In this instance, if I hadn’t kept doing it, my daughter would be so mentally scarred by now, and her school work would have suffered incredibly.

In this way, Teresa emphasises her determination to maintain a presence at the school, despite the disapproval she senses from staff. She declares that if there are any further incidents of bullying she will be ‘right there’ and ‘the teachers know that I’m not going to go away, and they need to deal with the issue’.

Similarly, Steve claims a strong sense of agency for himself as he describes how he advocated with the school and beyond on behalf of his son. He tells how he gave the Deputy Principal a very clear directive with regards to the disciplinary action he believed the school should take:

I said, ‘Well look, if you can’t stop it, you get rid of these kids!’ You know, a bit over the top. But when you’re looking after your own kids, that’s what you, well, that’s the point that you’re pushing.

Here, Steve considers that the stance he took with the school may have been a little strong, but justifies it in terms of his position as a parent trying to protect his child from harm. Further, he makes it clear that if the bullying directed towards

his son had not stopped, he was fully prepared to escalate his complaint to senior education authorities:

I know the whole system. I know how everything works ... I know how the school works. I know where to go if I need assistance, and what to do. Yep. I'm an informed, very informed person. I knew where I'd be going and what to do if I had to take it further.

For Steve, having access to information is a crucial means by which he maintains a sense of himself as an active agent in the world. Just as Teresa tells how she manages problems by taking an 'administrative' approach, Steve tells how he does so by ensuring that he is 'very informed' and has a solid grasp of 'how everything works'. In Steve's view, it was his knowledge of the local sporting clubs which provided him with the opportunity to intervene in the bullying by ensuring that the boys were placed on different teams and speaking directly with the perpetrators and one of their parents at sporting events. Further, Steve claims that it was his actions rather than anything the school had done which brought an end to the bullying:

In actual fact, I felt that um, I actually felt that it wasn't until I spoke to the other parent – I felt that I had solved it. That's what I, that's what I felt, that I solved it, not the school.

In this way, Steve draws on a modernist version of the quest narrative in which the storyteller positions themselves as the hero of the story who through their own actions is able to solve the problem at hand and restore a sense of order.

However, in his account Steve also emphasises his frustration at the lack of information he received from the school regarding the progress and outcome of

his complaint. Although Steve claims to have solved the bullying himself, he also notes that without further information from the school, he cannot be absolutely certain that this is the case:

It could have been that the school took whatever action they took, but I don't know...They said that they are not allowed to disclose it for privacy reasons. You know, they gave us a reason why, but it didn't close it off from my perspective. I like to know everything, I like to know everything, I like to be involved in everything, hence my involvement with the clubs and all that sort of stuff. And so I didn't have that, that closure.

For Steve, such a lack of certainty and 'closure' is particularly unsettling because it threatens to undermine his sense of himself as someone who maintains control by keeping himself fully informed.

In her account, Donna also tells how she tries to gather as much information as she can when responding to incidents of bullying. However, in contrast to Steve her intention in this is not to control the situation but to gain a deeper understanding of it from various points of view. In this way, Donna enacts a sense of agency which does not depend on overcoming the bullying her child encounters, but rather, seeks to use it to teach her son how to navigate negative experiences with resilience and empathy. From this perspective, her account aligns with a postmodern version of the quest narrative as described by Frank in which suffering is recognised as an 'intractable part of the human condition' (p. 146).

In Donna's view, the bullying Ben encounters at school is part of a broader set of social problems in their local community, and as such is likely to be an ongoing issue. However, as distinct from those parents who framed their

experiences in terms of a chaos narrative, Donna does not present herself as powerless to alter her child's situation. Throughout her account Donna emphasises the active role she plays in facilitating discussions which encourage children involved in bullying situations to 'come together and work it out'. For Donna, a key factor in the success of this strategy is the strength of her relationships within the school. She tells how, over more than ten years as a parent at the school, she has forged close relationships with a number of staff at the school, and this has put her in a position of 'advantage' whereby she can easily raise her concerns:

I think tenure at the place has given me the ability to wander in and out as I please. Not wander in and out and say 'let's put the kettle on' or anything like that, but I do think that I understand the way the school operates. So you know that after school you can catch somebody for five minutes or whatever...I have a good relationship with the Assistant Principal...I'll see her in the playground and I can shoot off a sentence to her and she knows what I'm talking about. I don't think a lot of people have that advantage.

Here, Donna positions herself as someone who has a high degree of agency within the school environment. However, she also indicates that recent changes in the school have caused her to reconsider how she positions herself in her interactions with teachers about incidents of bullying. As noted previously, Donna is disappointed by the lack of feedback she has received from teachers to her more recent reports of bullying and wonders if she now needs to advocate more forcefully on behalf of her son:

The only thing that concerns me is that I hope I'm doing the right thing by talking to Ben about the other side of things. And helping him understand that there is not just his point of view, and I just don't go up pointing my finger and going, 'Listen here, this is what's happening with my son, what the bleep are you going to do about this?' There's more to it than that.

KH: So why do you wonder if that's the right thing?

If I'm not, am I being forceful enough? Because there's other people that do go in and rant and rave. I'm not like that.

Although Donna resists taking such an adversarial stance with the school, she considers that she may need to do so if she is to do 'the right thing' on behalf of her son. In this way, Donna enacts a sense of agency which is always in a process of becoming in response to the changing demands of her role as a parent. As she observes while reflecting on her experiences of parenting her elder son, no matter how old you are, you are always 'a new mum' as you adapt and respond to each new experience your child encounters:

You are always a new mum. You're never an old mum... So that's always going to be, 'OK, so what do I do now? OK, so he's not doing well at uni, what do I say to him?' So I say, 'Have you thought of deferring? Or, 'Have you thought of this?' or, 'What, you are on academic probation? What does that mean? What does that look like?' You know, 'How do I deal with this?' So you are always a new mum.

From this perspective, Donna's account aligns with a postmodern acceptance of contingency and presents an alternative means of enacting the role of a capable parent to that offered by modernist versions of the quest narrative. Although she accepts that she cannot prevent her children from having negative

experiences, Donna does not speak from a position of powerlessness. Rather, her account demonstrates a sense of creative agency which is complex and mutable as she describes how she responds to the particularities of each new situation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how Teresa, Steve and Donna each drew on aspects of the quest narrative to recount their experiences of reporting bullying to their child's school. In particular, I have attended to the complexity in these parents' accounts as each also drew on elements of restitution and chaos narratives to convey their hopes and fears as they advocated on behalf of their child. Each told how they had approached their child's school with particular expectations regarding the type of assistance the school should provide, and each told how they had been disappointed by the responses they received. While Donna recalled an earlier time in which she had been able to work collaboratively with staff at her son's school to respond to incidents of bullying, she also told how she now fears that unless she takes a more assertive stance her son will be left with no effective support at school if he is bullied.

Each of these parents represents the unsatisfactory responses they received from the school as a call to action which, as a parent, they felt duty bound to respond to. Each alluded to the long-term harms which may accrue to their child if they did not take further action to intervene in the bullying. Throughout their accounts both Steve and Teresa represent the actions they took, and those they were prepared to take in the future, as the 'right thing' to do, not only in terms of helping their child in their current situation, but also as a demonstration of their moral identity as a parent. Although Donna sees a conflict between her preferred

approach to managing bullying situations and that which she feels is necessary in the current school environment, she too expresses a determination to do whatever she must in order to protect her son against the long-term harms associated with bullying.

By constructing their accounts in this way, these parents respond to the question which Frank identifies as at the heart of the quest narrative: ‘How did I rise to the occasion?’ (p. 128). Frank argues that the quest narrative functions as a reflexive ‘display of character’ (p. 131) and further, that such stories ‘are necessary to restore the moral agency that other stories sacrifice’ (p. 134). In telling how they rose to the challenges presented by their child’s experiences of being bullied, these parents also provide a demonstration of who they take themselves to be as parents and claim a sense of agency which is not available to them within stories told as restitution or chaos narratives.

However, it is important to note the tensions and ambiguities in how these parents represent themselves as active agents in responding to the bullying of their child. The complexities within and across these accounts suggest that parents see a number of possible ways to enact the role of a ‘good parent’ in response to bullying situations. While participants in this study most commonly cast themselves as the agentive hero of their own story, there is also a strong impulse in their accounts towards working more collaboratively with their child’s school in response to bullying situations. I now turn to the final chapter of thesis in which I argue that close attention to these nuances in how parents narrate their experiences of reporting bullying to schools is crucial to the development of more collaborative relations between parents and schools with respect to bullying.

Chapter 9: Discussion and Ways Forward

Introduction

In the preceding three chapters I used Arthur Frank's typology of restitution, chaos and quest narratives as a listening device to explore how parents narrate their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school. In this chapter I bring together insights from this interpretation and analysis with discussion of key issues regarding contemporary parenting culture and the role of parents in relation to school bullying as outlined in the literature review chapters. In keeping with dialogical approaches to research I do not attempt to make conclusive statements about the stories presented here. Rather, my purpose in this final chapter of the thesis is to draw attention to the resonances at play within these stories so as to invite further discussion about the cultural narratives which currently guide interactions between parents and schools with respect to bullying. Indeed, as Frank (2005, p. 967) has argued, the generative nature of stories is such that 'narrative analysis can never claim any last word about what a story means or represents. Instead, narrative analysis, like the story itself, can only look toward an open future'. From this perspective, the stories we tell about the social world function not only as representations of past experiences but also as templates for future actions. According to Frank (2010, p. 138), 'what people need is the broadest range of narrative resources to work with' in order to expand the range of possibilities available to them. In line with this, I suggest that the present study provides an opportunity to expand the range of narrative templates which currently guide interactions between parents and schools as they respond to incidents of bullying.

In what follows, I discuss how parents' stories of reporting bullying resonate with restitution, chaos and quest narratives. Further, I consider how these common storylines intersect with key features of contemporary parenting culture. In particular, I note how they intersect with dominant discourses of individual responsibility, the management of risk and the perceived need for professional expertise in contemporary parenting culture. Throughout this discussion I pay close attention to how these stories move between different narrative types, with aspects of each having more or less resonance at different stages in parents' reporting experiences. I argue that by attending to these nuances this study provides important insight into the ways in which parents are both constrained and enabled by broad cultural narratives about the roles and responsibilities of parents as they attempt to engage with schools about incidents of bullying. Further, I argue that such understandings are crucial to the development of more collaborative relations between parents and schools with respect to bullying. Finally, I consider the implications of the study for policy and practice and propose some areas for future research.

A Complex Weave of Storylines

According to Frank (2013, pp. 76-77), the value of using a narrative typology to analyse personal stories of experience is that it draws attention to the 'narrative flux' that exists within any one story, and to the range of narrative resources that storytellers draw on to make sense of their experiences. In the present study, this process revealed strong resonances between parents' stories of reporting bullying of their child to a school and the three core narratives of restitution, chaos and quest which Frank identifies as underlying most personal stories of illness. Further, the analysis showed that there was a great deal of

complexity in how parents narrated these experiences. Each parent's account contained multiple storylines and shifting subject positions as they narrated different phases of their reporting experiences, and many of their stories traversed all three narrative types described by Frank.

In Frank's view, a crucial aspect of personal stories of illness is the sense of threat that the storyteller perceives as a result of their illness, both physically and existentially: 'Illness threatens because it cancels our plans, forecloses our hopes, and reminds us that on the most basic physical level, we have no control of our lives' (Frank, 2009, p. 188). Similarly, in this study parents represented the bullying of their child as a disruptive life event which posed a significant threat not only to the safety and wellbeing of their child, but also to their own moral identity as a parent. For these parents the bullying their child experienced at school represented a threat to their capacity to carry out their most basic parental duty to keep their child safe and their stories were characterised by a strong moral impulse to protect their child from further harm. This aligns with recent research in this area which found that one of the most distressing aspects of parents' experiences of discovering that their child had been bullied at school was the feeling that they had failed in their duty to protect their child and could no longer be sure of themselves in their role as a 'good parent' (Hale et al., 2017; Harcourt et al., 2015).

All of the parents who took part in the present study told stories which resonate to some degree with discourses of intensive parenting which assign primary responsibility to parents for managing risks to their children's health and safety across a range of environments, including that of the school. As outlined in Chapter 2, notions of individual responsibility and the management of risk are key

features of current conceptualisations of ‘good parenting’. In line with this, the majority of parents drew on heroic aspects of the quest narrative as they told how they had risen to the challenges posed by the bullying of their child and taken action to protect them from further harm. At the same time, parents framed their experiences in terms of a restitution narrative in which they looked to the school to provide a solution to the bullying and restore a sense of safety to their child at school. In this way, their stories enact a major tension in contemporary parenting culture between a strong focus on parental agency and a perceived need for professional expertise to ensure that children achieve a range of desirable health, education and social outcomes.

Most parents began their accounts by describing how they had become aware that their child was being bullied at school. In doing so, they positioned themselves as a responsible parent who was alert to signs of potential problems in their child’s life. For example, Steve describes how he and his wife had noted that their son was more short tempered than usual with his siblings, and on questioning him about it discovered that he was reacting to having been the target of bullying at school. Jenny also describes how she was alerted to the seriousness of her son’s situation at school by changes she noted in his general attitude towards school, going from a child who was highly engaged in his learning to one who was reluctant to attend school. For these parents the bullying their child experienced at school represented a breach in the safe learning environment they expected the school to provide as part of its duty of care. In recounting their experiences parents made it clear that they expected the school to act *in loco parentis*, and to guard against a range of risks to their child’s health and safety, including those posed by exposure to bullying. From this perspective their stories

reflect the risk consciousness which researchers have argued is a pervasive feature of contemporary parenting culture (Faircloth, 2014; Furedi, 2008; Stearns, 2003). Indeed, research suggests that concerns about bullying can have a significant influence on where parents decide to send their child to school (Campbell et al., 2009; Proctor & Aitchison, 2015).

In the present study, parents represented the bullying their child experienced at school as a threat not only to their immediate safety but also to their future educational outcomes. For example, Teresa described how she had chosen her daughter's school as part of a long-term educational plan and was furious to think that this could be jeopardised by the behaviour of other children. Marie also worried that the bullying her son experienced had exacerbated his learning difficulties making it even harder for him to achieve good educational outcomes. Thus, what is at stake in these parents' stories extends far beyond their child's immediate circumstances at school to safeguarding an imagined future for them. From this perspective, their stories resonate with current conceptualisations of parenting as a future oriented activity (Furedi, 2008; Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012). As outlined in Chapter 2, under neoliberal social policy parents are increasingly seen as responsible, through the choices they make, for ensuring that their children achieve a range of desirable outcomes and grow up to become productive members of society. By reporting the bullying to the school these parents were attempting to ensure that their child remained safe at school, but also to ensure that they retained the best possible chance of achieving these long-term goals.

Even so, many of the parents described how they had struggled to decide whether or not to report the bullying to the school. Parents were often wary of

stepping in too soon and preventing their child from developing important life skills in resilience and problem solving. As Louise puts it, ‘You can’t rush in and fight every battle. There’s a point at which they have to learn to get on with people.’ Such caution resonates with public discourse about the dangers of ‘helicopter parenting’ in which parents are advised against becoming too closely involved in their children’s lives. A number of parents described how they were reluctant to contact the school about the bullying for fear of being judged in these terms, stating that they did not wish to be seen as the ‘problem parent’ or the ‘pushy parent’. As discussed in Chapter 2, such concerns are a key feature of contemporary parenting culture in which parents are caught in a ‘double bind’ between fulfilling the role of a responsible parent whose primary duty is to protect their child whilst also heeding warnings from child development experts about the damaging effects of over-protective parenting.

Many of the parents described a period before contacting the school in which they tried to counsel their child in how to manage the situation themselves. During these early stages parents saw an opportunity to teach their child some important life skills. For example, Louise contrasts the lack of support she received from her own mother when she was bullied at school with the guidance she now provides for her daughter in how to avoid troublemakers at school and protect herself online. Donna sees the bullying her son experiences as a chance to teach him to respond to such negative experiences with resilience and empathy by trying to help him understand what the other child’s circumstances might be. Similarly, in their study Brown et al. (2013) describe a stage prior to contacting the school when parents tried to equip their child with strategies to cope with the experience of being bullied at school.

Such efforts can be seen as part of an increasing emphasis in contemporary Western societies on the role of parents in ensuring that children acquire a range of social and emotional skills. As discussed in Chapter 2, there is now a vast array of psychologically based information and advice available to guide parents in this task. Much of this material focuses on how parents can foster children's skills in resilience and the ability to cope with negative experiences. As Hoffman (2010) argues, parents who fail to ensure that their children develop these emotional competencies are commonly represented as a source of risk to their children by preventing them from reaching their maximum potential. Further, as outlined in Chapter 3, such perceived failures in parenting are often associated with an increased risk of children becoming involved in bullying situations either as a bully or a victim. In describing how they had helped their children develop strategies to cope with the bullying these parents' stories draw on neoliberal discourses of resilience which emphasise the responsibility of individuals to cope with adversity by adapting to changes in their environment (Joseph, 2013).

A number of parents also described how, before contacting the school, they tried to elicit further details from their child about specific incidents to determine if what was happening was a case of bullying or some other type of problem. Some parents expressed concerns that unless they had clear evidence of behaviour which specifically met the school's definition of bullying their report would not be taken seriously. Although most parents were familiar with commonly used definitions of bullying as a form of aggressive behaviour which is repeated and involves an imbalance of power (Hemphill, Heerde, & Gomo, 2014), a number were unsure if this definition accurately described what their child was experiencing at school. For example, Lisa could not tell if the uneasiness her

daughter felt at her new school stemmed from social ineptitude on the part of her classmates or intentionally hurtful behaviours. Louise also noted that bullying behaviour occurs along a spectrum and parents need to make ‘a judgement call’ as to when the behaviour has escalated from being ‘just a bit mean’ to something more harmful which requires adult intervention.

In addition, some parents felt that this behaviourally focussed definition of bullying did not fit their circumstances because it does not take into account the broader culture at their child’s school which they saw as the source of their child’s distress rather than the behaviour of any one child or group of children in particular. For example, Martin described how his daughter’s anxiety related to a culture at her school which devalued her interests and hobbies and left her feeling socially rejected. Seen in isolation specific incidents did not seem to qualify as bullying, but Martin felt that when considered together, a broader pattern of social exclusion could be discerned which therefore necessitated some form of action from the school. Similarly, Charlotte saw the widespread and persistent teasing that her son endured on account of his long hair as evidence of a lack of tolerance for gender diversity within the culture of his school, and in society more generally, rather than aberrant behaviour by anyone in particular. These stories reflect ongoing debates about the nature of school bullying as a problem which stems from deficits in individuals or as a product of broader social and cultural practices. As discussed in Chapter 3, psychological conceptualisations of bullying as pathological behaviour have been highly influential in framing bullying as a problem to be addressed at the level of individuals. However, stories such as Martin’s and Charlotte’s align with a growing body of research which suggests that the problem requires responses which take into account the social and cultural

dimensions of bullying (e.g., Duncan, 2013; Horton, 2016; Ryan & Morgan, 2011; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Walton, 2005, 2011).

Although some parents were ambivalent about reporting the bullying to the school, all at some point decided that they needed to seek help from the school to address the problem. Some decided to approach the school after a particular incident which they felt had ‘crossed the line’ and confirmed for them that what their child was experiencing was indeed bullying and not some other form of childhood conflict. For example, Louise decided to contact the school after she learned that her daughter had been physically threatened and had also been the target of threats and abuse online. Others, such as Eve and Amanda, arrived at this decision after observing the cumulative effects of the bullying on their child’s wellbeing. Concerns about school avoidance, somatic symptoms such as stomach aches, and increasing conflict within the family about how to respond to the bullying prompted these parents to overcome their child’s objections and report the bullying to the school. In addition, a number of parents mentioned stories in the media about cases of bullying which had led young people to take their own lives, raising these as cautionary tales about what can happen if bullying is allowed to continue unchecked. Thus, in reporting the bullying to the school parents were seeking assistance to protect their child from a range of serious harms which they associated with ongoing exposure to bullying.

Restitution

As noted previously, all of the parents who took part in this study gave accounts which drew on aspects of the restitution narrative in which the storyteller looks to an external agent to resolve the problem at hand and to restore a sense of normality to their life. In this storyline the assumption was that the school, once

notified, would take responsibility for intervening in the bullying and restoring a sense of safety to their child at school. A number of parents described how they were encouraged in this view by the school's anti-bullying policies and other communications which advise parents to report incidents of bullying to the school. For example, Marie observed that the school promoted these policies in some 'glossy brochures' which were prominently displayed in the school office as well as through posters around the school which advertised a dedicated email address for parents to report incidents of bullying to the school. Jenny also described how the school's anti-bullying policies, including advice to parents to report incidents of bullying, were clearly laid out in student diaries. Such protocols are in line with the National Safe Schools Framework (Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEEDYA], 2010), which emphasises the importance of communication and collaboration between parents and schools with respect to bullying. Further, in contacting the school about the bullying parents were acting in accordance with current policy frameworks which urge parents to work in partnership with schools to ensure the best educational outcomes for their child (e.g., Department of Education and Training, 2016).

However, as outlined in Chapter 2, studies have shown that interactions between parents and schools are often fraught with tensions about the exact nature of such partnerships and the relative roles and responsibilities of parents and schools within them (e.g. Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Macfarlane, 2008, 2009). Recent research has shown that such tensions are particularly evident in interactions between parents and schools with respect to bullying (Brown et al., 2013; Hale et al., 2017; Harcourt et al., 2015; Hein, 2014, 2016). These studies found that parents were often dissatisfied with how schools responded to their

reports of bullying and felt that schools should take greater responsibility for intervening in bullying situations. In addition, a recent Australian survey of responses to bullying in government schools found that parents were often highly critical of how schools managed incidents of bullying and expected more action than they believed had been taken (Rigby & Johnson, 2016).

Similarly, the majority of participants in the present study felt that the school had failed to provide an adequate response to their reports of bullying. Of the 18 parents who took part in the study, only six gave accounts in which they attributed the resolution of bullying they had reported to actions taken by the school. Although they may be in the minority, these positive stories provide much needed templates for collaborative relations between parents and schools with respect to bullying. As noted previously, existing research on this topic provides limited information about successful collaborations between parents and schools to resolve instances of bullying. For example, Brown et al. (2013) describe a single case in which a parent was satisfied with the way the school had responded to their report of bullying. This case involved swift investigation of the bullying, interventions on multiple levels including notifying the perpetrator's parents, and follow-up communication with the parent who reported the bullying. Similarly Hale et al. (2017) found that only three of the 21 parents who took part in their study described positive experiences with their child's school in regards to reports of bullying. They argue that a key feature of these positive experiences was the direct and timely communication these parents received from the school in response to their reports of bullying meaning that they had trust in the school to address the problem.

The present study adds to these few examples of positive interactions between parents and schools with respect to bullying and provides further insight into the meanings these experiences hold for parents. In Chapter 6, I provided a detailed exploration of the stories of three parents, Jenny, Louise and Lisa, all of whom were satisfied with the response they received from their child's school to their report of bullying. Further examples of such positive experiences are also included in Chapter 5 in vignettes based on interviews with Sara, Charlotte and Donna, each of whom recounted both positive and negative experiences of reporting bullying. By exploring these stories of parents' positive experiences of reporting bullying, this study provides important insight into which aspects of these experiences have particular salience for parents and what they perceive as a satisfactory response to reports of bullying.

In recounting their experiences, Jenny, Louise and Lisa all followed the basic storyline of the restitution narrative in which the problem at hand is seen as a temporary problem which is resolved with the help of an external agent. Accordingly, all three of these parents represented the bullying their child experienced at school as a temporary disruption to the normally safe conditions of their schooling. Each described how, once notified of the problem, the school had taken action to intervene in the bullying and restore a sense of safety to their child at school. All three expressed satisfaction with the approach taken by the school and the short amount of time it took for the bullying to stop. Although these parents noted that their children had learned some valuable lessons as a result of these experiences, each represented the bullying as a relatively brief episode in their child's life which had now returned to normal.

A key feature of these parents' stories is the high degree of professionalism they attributed to school staff who responded to their reports of bullying. In each case an individual member of staff, such as a Year Coordinator, had taken responsibility for overseeing the school's response to the bullying and kept in close contact with parents as they worked to resolve the problem. The quick and clear response that these parents received from the school confirmed for them that they had made the right decision in reporting the bullying to school. In line with findings by Hale et al. (2017), the regular communication these parents received from the school about the progress of their report also meant that they had trust in the school to manage the situation and bring the bullying to an end.

These parents also found reassurance in knowing that the school had clear policies and processes to deal with incidents of bullying. Further, they were impressed by the close congruence they saw between these stated policies and the actions taken by the school to resolve the bullying. For example, Louise described how the 'zero tolerance' policies at her daughter's school were backed up by the measures which were taken by the Year Coordinator in response to the bullying, including contacting the parents of the perpetrators. Lisa also saw a close connection between the response she received to her report of bullying and a more general undertaking by the school to provide a quick response to any concerns that parents might have about their child's experience at the school, whether that be academic or social.

In addition, these parents were impressed by the professional expertise staff brought to their interactions with students about the bullying. For example, Jenny spoke approvingly of the holistic approach her son's Year Coordinator applied to the problem. She described how he worked closely with students to

foster an ethos of community care as a means of preventing bullying behaviours. However, at the same time there were clear consequences for students who engaged in bullying behaviours. In Jenny's view, this combination of pastoral care and clear boundaries was a skilful means of dealing with a complex problem. Similarly, Charlotte described the skill with which her son's teacher had managed to circumvent the persistent teasing her son experienced on account of his long hair by tailoring lessons to foster greater understanding and acceptance of gender diversity in the class. Sara also admired the creative way in which her daughter's new teacher had used classroom activities to support her daughter and bolster her social standing with her peers.

From this perspective, these parents' stories align with the focus on professional expertise which is a key feature of the restitution narrative. As Frank (2013) has argued, such a focus fits within a modernist master narrative in which it is assumed that every problem can be solved with the right expertise. However, although these parents were appreciative of the professionalism with which staff responded to their report of bullying, for the most part they did not position themselves as passive recipients of the solutions offered by the school. In contrast to the lack of agency which is typically displayed by the storyteller of the restitution narrative, these parents described how they had worked collaboratively with the school to ensure that their child's situation improved. In particular, they described how they continued to monitor the situation and communicated closely with the school as various interventions were put in place. Further, they described a number of strategies they used alongside those implemented by the school to protect their child. For example, Jenny and Sara both sought to buffer the effects of the bullying by extending their child's friendship network outside of school,

while Louise helped her daughter set up security settings on her Facebook page to protect her from online bullying. Although they were satisfied that the episode of bullying they had reported had now come to end, these parents remained alert to the possibility that their child may be bullied again in the future and were ready to make contact with the school again if this should occur.

Each of these parents expressed confidence that, given the way the school had handled their previous report of bullying, any future reports they might make would also be taken seriously. This sense of trust in the school to act on reports of bullying was a key element in the collaborative relations these parents described between themselves and the school. A further element which contributed to this sense of collaboration was the acknowledgement parents received from the school that they had done the right thing in reporting the bullying. This had significance for parents in a number of ways. Firstly, they were relieved that the school recognised the behaviour they had reported as bullying. In the restitution narrative, diagnosis is crucial to determining the course of action which brings about a resolution to the problem at hand. Accordingly, parents saw the acknowledgement they received from the school as confirmation that their report was taken seriously and that the school would take action to resolve the bullying. Secondly, parents felt buoyed by the thanks they received from staff for bringing the bullying to their attention. Parents saw this as an indication that their actions were seen as a help rather than a hindrance to the work of the school.

Charlotte provides a clear illustration of the importance of this type of acknowledgement when she contrasts the dismissive attitude she encountered from the Principal at her son's former primary school when she raised concerns about aggressive behaviours at the school with the gratitude expressed by her

son's teacher at his new school when she reported the teasing her son was experiencing. While the response she received at her son's former school left her feeling that it was futile to try and communicate with the school, at her son's new school she was able to enter into a productive dialogue with the teacher during which she made a number of suggestions about ways to improve social relations in the class. This led to the teacher making some additions to the content of his lessons which, in Charlotte's view, resulted in a rapid improvement in her son's situation at school. Importantly, Charlotte came away from this meeting feeling that her son's teacher regarded her as a respected partner in solving a problem rather than 'a nagging parent making his job harder'. Thus, the acknowledgement parents received from their child's school to their reports of bullying also played an important part in affirming their identity as a responsible parent who was acting appropriately by advocating on behalf of their child with the school.

Such a sense of acknowledgement was pivotal to how parents narrated their experiences and the way in which they positioned themselves in relation to their child's school. As noted previously, all of the parents who took part in this study initially positioned themselves within a restitution narrative in which they looked to the school to resolve the bullying. However, only those few parents who felt that the school had truly acknowledged the validity of their report of bullying continued to frame their experiences as a restitution narrative. Most described how the school had failed to provide such acknowledgement, and this marked a shift in their story away from the certainty of the restitution narrative towards the sense of fear and unpredictability which characterises the chaos narrative.

Chaos

In Chapter 7, I explored the stories of three parents, Martin, Eve and Amanda, whose children had been bullied at school over a number of years. Each of these parents described how they had made a series of unsuccessful attempts to get the school to acknowledge the validity of their reports of bullying and to take action to resolve the situation. Each told of the trauma they experienced as they witnessed their child's increasing distress when the bullying continued despite their repeated requests for assistance from the school. In recounting their experiences, these parents evoked the extreme sense of vulnerability which Frank describes as typical of the chaos narrative. In contrast to stories told as restitution narratives in which parents found reassurance in the response they received from the school, in these stories parents emphasised the deep sense of betrayal they felt as staff failed to acknowledge the validity of their reports of bullying and gave no assurance that the school would take action to resolve the situation.

Although the majority of parents who took part in this study told how through one means or another the bullying of their child did eventually come to an end, most evoked elements of the chaos narrative as they described how they had struggled to have their reports of bullying taken seriously by the school. As discussed previously, in the restitution narrative, diagnosis or the correct naming of an illness is crucial to determining a course of action to remedy the problem. In the chaos narrative, with no clear identification of the problem there is no clear plan for a remedy and the storyteller is subject to ongoing fear and uncertainty about what the future may hold. Similarly, many of the parents who took part in this study told how the school's failure to recognise the behaviour they had reported as evidence of bullying signalled that there was no clear plan of

action to resolve the problem, thus leaving their child vulnerable to further bullying.

Parents found it particularly distressing when incidents which they saw as clear evidence of bullying seemed to be accepted by school staff as normal childhood behaviour and did not prompt any form of action by the school. For example, Jackie was shocked by the ‘flippant’ responses she received from teachers and the Principal when she complained about the verbal and physical abuse her two children had experienced at their school. She tells how, after having her concerns dismissed numerous times, she began to doubt her own judgement and wonder if she was being ‘hyper-sensitive’. Similarly, Martin was dismayed when the detailed account of events he provided to the school as evidence of the relational bullying his daughter was experiencing was dismissed as normal behaviour for teenage girls. Further, he tells how indignant he felt when he was specifically directed by staff not to call the behaviour bullying.

Stories such as these highlight the difficulties parents experience as they try to interpret their child’s experiences and determine if they will ‘count’ as bullying in the eyes of the school. In a number of cases parents complained that the school had misinterpreted their child’s situation as one of conflict between peers rather than a case of bullying. Although some schools offered mediation in such cases, parents were often dissatisfied with this approach because they did not feel that it took into account the more powerful position occupied by the perpetrator of the bullying. For example, Teresa describes how attempts at mediation in her daughter’s case had resulted in an escalation of the bullying because it failed to give the main perpetrator a clear message that her behaviour was unacceptable. Further, Teresa noted that poor record keeping by the school

meant that incidents were often viewed and dealt with in isolation rather than being recognised as part of a broader pattern of intentionally hurtful behaviour.

A key feature of such stories is the lack of trust parents expressed in the ability of school staff to intervene effectively in bullying situations. While those parents who framed their experiences in terms of a restitution narrative found reassurance in the professional manner in which staff had managed their child's situation, the majority of parents who took part in the study were highly critical of the interventions made by staff in response to their reports of bullying. Many complained that staff appeared to lack expertise in this area and that the ad hoc nature of their interventions had worsened the situation for their child. In particular, parents were critical of approaches which did not provide a clear set of consequences for bullying behaviour. For example, Eve was deeply disappointed by the 'soft and fluffy' approach taken by the Principal at her daughter's school when he gave a talk to the whole school about bullying in general but did not invoke any consequences for specific incidents which she had reported. In Eve's view this strategy did not provide any disincentive to the perpetrators of the bullying. To the contrary, Eve attributed the escalation of the bullying her daughter experienced to the lack of authority demonstrated by the Principal in response to previous episodes of bullying. Similarly, Amanda felt that the lack of a clear response from staff to incidents of bullying at her daughter's school gave perpetrators the message that they could continue to harass her daughter with impunity.

A further criticism made by parents relates to the tendency of staff to focus on deficits in the child who was being bullied rather than censuring the behaviour of those who were bullying, or looking to see what in the broader culture of the

school might influence such behaviour. A number of parents described how staff made suggestions about what their child could do differently to enable them to ‘fit in’ better with their peers. Others were advised to seek counselling for their child to help them develop greater social and emotional resilience. Parents were highly critical of such suggestions and represented them as evidence of a ‘victim blaming’ mentality on the part of the school. A number of parents expressed the view that this kind of approach only served to stigmatise their child and made staff less inclined to take their reports of bullying seriously. For example, Donna observed that her son’s teacher had minimised the bullying her son experienced by claiming that he was ‘a bit of a drama queen’.

In addition, parents saw such a focus on their child’s deficits as an implied criticism of their own performance as a parent. As Eve explained, one of the most upsetting aspects of her interactions with her daughter’s school was the implication that she must be ‘doing something wrong as a parent’ to cause her daughter to be bullied. As discussed in Chapter 3, representations of parents as a risk to their children due to perceived faults in their parenting are a key feature of dominant psychological conceptualisations of bullying. From this perspective, over-protective parenting is seen to restrict children’s social and emotional development, thereby placing them at greater risk of becoming a victim of bullying (Lereya et al., 2013). Such ideas were particularly salient in stories told by parents whose initial reports of bullying had not been acted on by the school. The failure of the school to take action in response to their reports of bullying often led parents to doubt their own judgement and wonder if they were being over-protective in bringing the bullying to the attention of the school. A number of parents also described how they had hesitated to report further incidents of

bullying to the school for fear of being judged negatively as a ‘problem parent’. For example, Martin described how he had reached an impasse at his daughter’s school in which he feared that any further efforts on his part to convince staff of the severity of his daughter’s situation would be interpreted as evidence that he was an ‘over-intense parent’ and therefore a causal factor in his daughter’s problems at school.

Parents also described how the anxiety they felt in relation to the bullying of their child was exacerbated by the lack of information provided by the school regarding what actions had been taken in response to their reports of bullying. In contrast to the clear and regular communication described by parents who framed their experiences in terms of restitution, many parents described how the school either did not get back in contact with them following their reports of bullying, or declined to give details of what actions had been taken for reasons of privacy. Without such information parents feared that their report had either been forgotten or dismissed as inconsequential and that their child would remain vulnerable to further bullying. This left parents in a state of limbo, not knowing if they should contact the school again or take matters into their own hands. As Marie puts it, ‘It’s OK to report the bullying ... but it’s what happens to it. Once you do your bit, what happens then?’

Thus, the majority of parents who took part in this study found little reason to believe that the school would take action to bring the bullying of their child to an end. Many feared that with no effective action from the school their child would continue to be bullied with potentially serious consequences for their future health and wellbeing. Further, the dismissive responses that parents received from the school to their reports of bullying threatened to undermine their sense of

themselves as a competent parent who was able to advocate effectively on behalf of their child. In recounting these experiences parents evoked the sense of powerlessness which is a key feature of the chaos narrative. This aligns with previous research in this area which has drawn attention to the powerlessness often felt by parents as they attempt to engage with schools about incidents of bullying (Brown et al., 2013; Hale et al., 2017; Harcourt et al., 2015; Hein, 2014, 2016). These studies found that the responses parents received from schools to their reports of bullying most often served to compound rather than alleviate the problem. For example, Hein (2014) found that parents who reported incidents of bullying to schools were positioned by staff according to negative parental stereotypes which disempowered them as they attempted to advocate on behalf of their child. In addition, parents became frustrated and angry when staff looked to the home environment for the source of their child's problems at school. Similarly, Hale et al. (2017) found that the lack of control parents experienced during such interactions threatened to undermine their sense of themselves as a 'good parent' who was able to protect their child from harm.

Although previous research has emphasised the sense of powerlessness often felt by parents in this situation, it is important to note that studies have also found that, in the absence of effective action from the school, some parents take it upon themselves to resolve the problem. For example, Brown et al. (2013, p. 508) identified a phase in parents' reporting experiences which they termed 'aftermath' in which 'parents were left with the understanding that it was up to them to restore their child's sense of safety at school'. During this phase parents took a range of actions to ensure that the bullying stopped, including changing their child's school or opting to home-school. In addition, Harcourt et al. (2015) found that while

some parents who were dissatisfied with the response they received from the school chose to remove their child from the school, others took a more confrontational approach and threatened to involve authorities beyond the school. As discussed in Chapter 2, research suggests that parents are most likely to become confrontational in their communications with schools when they perceive that the school is failing in its responsibility in *loco parentis* or that their competence as a parent is being called into question by the school (Ranson et al., 2004; Vincent & Martin, 2002).

In the present study, the majority of parents told how the realisation that they could not rely on the school to protect their child from further bullying had prompted them to take further action themselves to resolve the problem. Although parents commonly drew on aspects of the chaos narrative to describe how they had struggled to have their reports of bullying taken seriously by the school, only one parent told a story in which there was no respite from the sense of powerlessness which characterises the chaos narrative. In this study, Martin's story was notable for the hopelessness it conveyed as he told how he could see no way of bringing an end to the bullying his daughter was experiencing at school. The majority of parents told how the unsatisfactory response they received from their child's school to their reports of bullying had acted as a catalyst for them to find alternative ways to resolve the problem. This represents a significant shift in their stories away from the vulnerability and futility of the chaos narrative toward the strong sense of agency which characterises the quest narrative.

Quest

According to Frank (2013), quest stories are necessary to restore the moral agency that is denied to the storyteller by restitution and chaos narratives. In

Chapter 8, I explored the stories of three parents, Teresa, Steve and Donna, who drew on aspects of the quest narrative to position themselves as a ‘good parent’ who was acting in the best interests of their child. Each of these parents represented the unsatisfactory response they received from their child’s school as a call to action and cast themselves as the hero of their story as they told how they had worked to restore a sense of safety to their child. From this perspective their stories resonate with broad cultural understandings regarding the primary responsibility of parents to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their child.

As noted previously, the majority of parents who took part in this study were dissatisfied with the response they received from their child’s school to their reports of bullying and felt compelled to take further action themselves to resolve the problem. Participants described a range of actions they had taken to intervene in the bullying including: taking a more assertive stance with the school, contacting authorities beyond the school and talking directly to perpetrators of the bullying or to their parents. As in previous studies (Brown et al., 2013; Hale et al., 2017; Harcourt et al., 2015), a number of parents also chose to remove their child from the school rather than leave them in what they considered to be an unsafe environment. For some, this involved significant upheaval as they needed to relocate in order to enrol their child in a different government school. For example, Charlotte and Jackie had both chosen to move to the city after they were unable to gain a satisfactory response to their reports of bullying at their local rural school. Those who could not or did not wish to relocate found other ways of ensuring a safe learning environment for their child. For example, Kim described how she gained permission to enrol her daughter at a school outside of her local area by advocating with education authorities for special consideration due to the

ongoing nature of the bullying. However Kate decided to opt out of formal schooling altogether, choosing to home-school all of her children after her son's experiences with bullying made her wary about the level of safety in schools in general.

Other parents were adamant that, having chosen a particular school for their child, they would stay and continue to advocate on behalf of their child. In her story, Teresa clearly attributes the resolution of the bullying her daughter was experiencing to her own perseverance in keeping a written record of each incident and bringing them to the attention of the school. Although Teresa believes that her continued advocacy meant that she was seen by staff as something of a nuisance, she claims that if she had not persisted in reporting the bullying her daughter would have suffered greatly in terms of her mental health and poor academic outcomes. In this way, Teresa represents the assertive stance she took with the school as morally justified. At the same time, she is saddened by the isolated position this placed her in at the school and tells of the emotional strength it took to maintain a presence there. Similarly, Steve justifies the actions he took in speaking directly with the perpetrators of the bullying and their parents in terms of his position as a parent trying to protect his child from harm. In Steve's view, the school's failure to communicate openly with parents about incidents of bullying put him in a difficult position where he felt morally obliged to inform another parent about the behaviour of their child. However, as was the case with Teresa, Steve felt that there had been a social cost to speaking out about the bullying. Not only did he feel that he had lost a friend by doing so, he also felt estranged from the school and less inclined to be involved in committee work or other voluntary activities at the school.

By detailing the obstacles they had overcome and the sacrifices they made to protect their child, many of the parents who took part in this study drew strongly on heroic aspects of the quest narrative to make sense of their experiences. In this way, their stories align with discourses of intensive parenting which assign primary responsibility to parents for managing risks to their children's health and safety. However, at the same time there was a strong impulse in these parents' stories toward working more collaboratively with schools and other parents to respond to incidents of bullying. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of these stories was the sense of isolation that many of the parents felt as they advocated on behalf of their child. As noted previously, by reporting the bullying to the school parents were acting in accordance with current policy directives for parents to work in partnership with schools to address a range of educational issues, including school bullying. However, the sense of betrayal that parents felt when their reports of bullying were dismissed by their child's school suggests that there are significant gaps between how parents would wish to see themselves within such partnerships and how they perceive their interactions with school staff.

Further, many of the parents who took part in the study expressed a desire for greater communication and shared responsibility between parents when incidents of bullying occur. For example, Jenny, Steve, Kate and Jackie all described how they had tried to reach out to other parents for help to resolve the bullying their child was experiencing. Although these stories show that such discussions can be fraught with difficulty, they nonetheless demonstrate a tension between neoliberal conceptualisations of parenting as a highly individualised activity and a desire for more communal responses to issues of bullying and the

care of children more generally. In this respect, these stories lend support to critiques of contemporary parenting culture which posit that an increasing focus on individual responsibility for the care of children functions to undermine trust and mutual support between parents (Bristow, 2014b; Furedi, 2008). In line with this, the stories presented here suggest that the isolating nature of intensive parenting practices contributes significantly to the lack of support and sense of stigma which previous research suggests is often experienced by parents whose children are bullied at school (Harcourt et al., 2014).

A further layer of complexity in stories told as quest narratives relates to the way in which parents represent themselves in their role as a parent. As noted previously, a distinguishing feature of the quest narrative is the strong sense of agency it affords to the storyteller. While parents commonly drew on heroic aspects of the quest narrative to describe how they had risen to the challenges posed by the bullying of their child, some also drew on transformative aspects of the quest narrative in which the storyteller views adversity as an opportunity for learning and growth. In particular, a number of parents reflected on how they had grown in their role as a parent as a result of their experiences advocating on behalf of their child. From this perspective, the quest narrative functions as a self-story in which ‘the genesis of the quest is some occasion requiring the person to be more than she has been, and the purpose is becoming one who has risen to that occasion’ (Frank, 2013, p. 128). For example, Eve and Amanda both told how they had struggled to take a decisive role in responding to the bullying of their child but had eventually found the strength to do so. Both told how they had been galvanised into action by the anger they felt towards the school for failing in its duty of care, but also by their own sense of guilt for allowing the situation to

continue for so long. Further, both represent their eventual expression of anger as a major turning point in their story when they felt they had ‘stepped up’ to their responsibility as a parent to protect their child from harm.

Similarly, Donna drew on transformative aspects of the quest narrative to consider the kind of parent she may need to become within a rapidly changing school environment. In her story, Donna considers a number of ways in which she could position herself in relation to her son’s school in regard to incidents of bullying. She tells how, over her many years as a parent at the school, she has worked closely with particular teachers to help her son navigate episodes of bullying. However, in an increasingly time-pressured school environment where such close relations between parents and teachers are difficult to maintain, Donna imagines that she may need to adopt a more forceful approach with the school to ensure a satisfactory outcome for her son. For Donna, the ability to adapt in this way is a crucial means by which she enacts her role as a responsible parent in an increasingly complex social environment. Thus, through stories of transformation and self-discovery, these parents enact a sense of creative agency which enables them to fashion a new parenting identity for themselves as they respond to the bullying of their child. In this way, their stories align with notions of parenting as a form of ‘performativity’ which responds to a range of cultural influences and as such is always in a state of flux (Geinger et al., 2014).

As I have shown, in this study there was a great deal of complexity in how parents narrated their experiences of reporting bullying of their child to a school and in the type of agency they claimed for themselves as they did so. However, a common thread throughout their stories was a concern with what kind of parent their actions showed them to be. In this way, each parent’s story functioned as a

demonstration of their moral identity as a parent. Taken together, these stories highlight the pervasive influence of neoliberal discourses of reflexive individualism which encourage parents to produce themselves as self-scrutinising individuals who are constantly making choices about the kind of parent they want to be (Jensen, 2010). And yet, as this study also shows, such choices are made in the context of strong cultural narratives about what constitutes ‘good parenting’ and in particular, the primary responsibility of parents for ensuring the best possible outcomes for their child. While recent studies have shown how notions of ‘good parenting’ can undermine parental agency with regard to incidents of bullying (Hale et al., 2017; Hein, 2014, 2016), the stories presented here show that parents engage with these ideas in highly complex ways which may also afford them a strong sense of agency as they respond to the bullying of their child. By tracing the complexities in how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying, and marking the moments when their stories shift from one narrative type to another, the present study reveals a dynamic process of identity construction in which parents are both constrained and enabled by notions of parental responsibility with regard to bullying. I now turn to the final section of the chapter in which I consider the implications that such understandings have for policy and practice and propose some areas for future research.

Moving Beyond Discourses of Responsibility and Blame

This study provides a rich and nuanced account of how parents make sense of their experiences of reporting bullying to schools. The prevalence of the quest narrative in the stories presented here speaks to the strength of broad cultural narratives regarding the role of parents as powerful agents in protecting their child from harm. However, these stories also suggest that in the context of school

bullying, parental agency is often accompanied by a profound sense of disconnection between parents and schools. When parents feel that their concerns are not being heard and that they must strike out on their own in order to keep their child safe at school, efforts to build partnerships between parents and schools are seriously undermined.

In line with previous research on this topic (Brown et al., 2013; Hale et al., 2017; Harcourt et al., 2014; Hein, 2014, 2016), the present study highlights the importance of open and timely communication between parents and schools about incidents of bullying. In particular, the study draws attention to the need for schools to ensure that there are clear processes in place to respond to parents' reports of bullying and to keep parents informed about how the school is managing the situation at each stage of the process. While most parents who took part in the study noted the existence of an anti-bullying policy at their child's school, it was the lack of congruence between these stated policies and the response they received when they reported incidents of bullying which prompted a number of parents to view their child's school with mistrust and resentment. As these stories also illustrate, strained relations between parents and schools can contribute to children having more protracted experiences of bullying as parents may be reluctant to approach schools about further incidents. Thus, it is at the level of practice, particularly the relational aspects of how school staff respond to parents who report incidents of bullying, that change is most urgently required.

As discussed previously, a key concern in many of the parents' stories was the implied criticism they felt from staff surrounding their parenting practices. I suggest that such a dynamic flows from dominant conceptualisations of bullying as individual pathological behaviour which is often associated with deficits in

parenting. As I have argued elsewhere (Herne, 2016), the dominance of this view in school bullying research has contributed to counter-productive discourses of responsibility and blame whereby parents are constructed as both the cause of and solution to the problem, with little account taken of the broader social and cultural contexts in which bullying takes place.

Two decades ago, Hepburn (1997) found that in talking about bullying, teachers commonly drew on discourses of individual responsibility and blame which, she argues, serve to maintain rather than alleviate the problem of bullying. The stories presented here suggest that, despite support for socio-ecological approaches to the prevention of school bullying (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010), when responding to incidents of bullying many teachers continue to look to deficits in individual children and their immediate family circumstances as the source of the problem. In line with critiques of individualistic approaches to school bullying research and prevention programs (Davies, 2011; Duncan, 2013; Ryan & Morgan, 2011; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Søndergaard, 2014; Walton, 2011), I contend that such a focus limits our capacity to respond to a complex social phenomenon in flexible and imaginative ways.

As Søndergaard (2014, p. 390) has argued: ‘It is important to bear in mind that the contexts in which bullying takes place are characterised by ever-changing social conditions, shifting actors and continuously emerging dilemmas and social manoeuvrings’. Such understandings are crucial if we are to move beyond reductive discourses of individual responsibility and blame which can serve to stigmatise and alienate parents, and to foster instead practices which afford respect and dignity to parents and school staff alike as they work to resolve

bullying situations. Here, I concur with Vincent (2017, p. 9) who has called for the development of more ‘dialogic relations’ between parents and teachers. From this perspective, partnerships between parents and school staff can be reframed as ‘communities of practice’ which ‘exist as a collective process of dialogic learning’ (Price-Mitchell, 2009, p. 20).

I suggest that such a shift in parent-school relations would support the impulse towards more communal responses to bullying expressed by a number of parents who took part in this study. In addition, more dialogic relations between parents and schools with regard to incidents of bullying would reduce the likelihood of parents casting themselves within a heroic quest narrative in which they perceive that they must act independently of the school to keep their child from harm. As Vincent (2017, p. 9) observes, ‘an expectation of a more dialogic relationship between teachers and parents would lessen the dependence on an individual parent’s will and capacity to scrutinise their child’s school career independently’.

However, as Price-Mitchell (2009, p. 20) points out: ‘For parents and schools to constitute a community of practice, they must value the knowledge and experience of one another and work through the structures and processes designed to collaborate across boundaries’. Thus, an important task for future research is to explore how schools can foster more dialogic relations with parents as they respond to incidents of bullying. In particular, research should explore the discursive conditions which support staff to adopt an engaged and empathetic stance in responding to parents’ reports of bullying. As the stories presented here illustrate, such a stance is key to encouraging parents to report any further

incidents of bullying in a timely manner and to trust the school's processes in managing the situation.

Accordingly, the present study could usefully be extended to explore the stories of teachers and other school staff who have responded to parents' reports of bullying. A detailed exploration of these stories would provide insight into the implications that common storylines and associated subject positions have for how school staff interpret and respond to parental reports of bullying. In particular, such research should seek to identify those storylines which are most conducive to collaborative relations between parents and schools with respect to bullying.

A further task for future research is to explore how narrative practices can be incorporated into teacher training and professional development to help teachers respond more effectively when parents approach them with concerns about bullying. According to Frank (2012, p. 48-49), one way in which his typology of illness narratives is useful is that it can enhance 'professional listening' and help clinicians to hear the different narrative threads that patients use to construct their stories of illness and how these change over time. In addition, Frank (2010, p. 123) argues that naming these narrative types 'enables people to understand what stories they are telling and how their own responses and plans—their sense of possibility—are conducted by those stories'. In this regard, I suggest that the field of narrative medicine has much to offer in terms of education and training to deepen the capacity of teachers to respond to parents' reports of bullying with 'empathy, reflection, professionalism and trustworthiness' (Charon, 2001, p. 1897).

Thus, future research in this vein should investigate how narrative practices can be used to support more open and trusting communications between parents and schools with respect to bullying. In conjunction with the present study, such research may help to facilitate the emergence of new storylines in which the knowledge and experience of parents are valued alongside professional expertise in responding to school bullying.

Epilogue

It's happening again. A new school, a new start and here we are again. But this time I'm quick off the mark. There's too much at stake to let things spiral out of control. I am well-versed by now in what counts as bullying and what doesn't and this certainly makes the grade. I know who to contact and I fire off an email listing all the facts as I know them, making it clear that I expect the school to nip this situation in the bud.

The swift and sure response I receive shocks me. There is acknowledgement and empathy for how I am feeling and a calm acceptance of responsibility: 'I'm so sorry that this happened on our watch.' Next, there is a clear plan for making sure that my son feels safe and supported at school and that those who might have it otherwise know without a shadow of a doubt that that isn't OK. Things roll out just as they say and it stops. It stops.

A couple of weeks pass and then there is a phone call from the school. I catch my breath, but there is no drama. They are just checking back to see how we are all travelling now. I say that things seem to have settled, but admit that I'm still nervous and watching to see if it will start up again. There is a space and then, with no hint of judgement comes: 'It's OK, we've got him. We've got him.' And I trust now that, together, we do.

I breathe out and turn towards my day.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval

Social Science Ethics Officer
Private Bag 01 Hobart
Tasmania 7001 Australia
Tel: (03) 6226 2763
Fax: (03) 6226 7148
Katherine.Shaw@utas.edu.au



HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (TASMANIA) NETWORK

8 February 2013

Dr Jeanne Allen
Faculty of Education
Private Bag 66

Student Researcher: Karen Herne

Sent via email

Dear Dr Allen

Re: FULL ETHICS APPLICATION APPROVAL
Ethics Ref: **H0012883 - Parents' experiences of reporting bullying to schools**

We are pleased to advise that the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee approved the above project on 8 February 2013.

This approval constitutes ethical clearance by the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. The decision and authority to commence the associated research may be dependent on factors beyond the remit of the ethics review process. For example, your research may need ethics clearance from other organisations or review by your research governance coordinator or Head of Department. It is your responsibility to find out if the approval of other bodies or authorities is required. It is recommended that the proposed research should not commence until you have satisfied these requirements.

Please note that this approval is for four years and is conditional upon receipt of an annual Progress Report. Ethics approval for this project will lapse if a Progress Report is not submitted.

The following conditions apply to this approval. Failure to abide by these conditions may result in suspension or discontinuation of approval.

1. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval, to ensure the project is conducted as approved by the Ethics Committee, and to notify the Committee if any investigators are added to, or cease involvement with, the project.

A PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

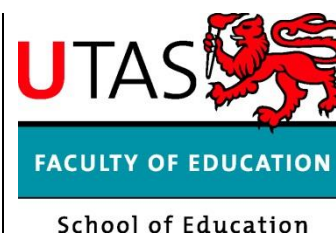
2. Complaints: If any complaints are received or ethical issues arise during the course of the project, investigators should advise the Executive Officer of the Ethics Committee on 03 6226 7479 or human.ethics@utas.edu.au.
3. Incidents or adverse effects: Investigators should notify the Ethics Committee immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
4. Amendments to Project: Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval is obtained from the Ethics Committee. Please submit an Amendment Form (available on our website) to notify the Ethics Committee of the proposed modifications.
5. Annual Report: Continued approval for this project is dependent on the submission of a Progress Report by the anniversary date of your approval. You will be sent a courtesy reminder closer to this date. **Failure to submit a Progress Report will mean that ethics approval for this project will lapse.**
6. Final Report: A Final Report and a copy of any published material arising from the project, either in full or abstract, must be provided at the end of the project.

Yours sincerely

Katherine Shaw
Ethics Officer
Tasmania Social Sciences HREC

Appendix B: Parent Information Sheet

Parents' experiences of reporting bullying to schools



Dear Parents,

Thank you for your interest in this research study to explore parents' experiences of reporting incidents of bullying to schools. This study is being conducted by Ms Karen Herne as part of the requirements of a PhD degree, under the supervision of Dr Jeanne Allen and Dr Janet Dymont in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to understand how parents whose children have been bullied experience reporting incidents of bullying to schools. Although parents are increasingly acknowledged as an important element in effective responses to school bullying, very little research has investigated parents' experiences of reporting incidents of bullying to schools. It is hoped that by gaining an understanding of what this process is like for parents, the research will provide insight into how schools can collaborate effectively with parents when responding to incidents of bullying.

Who can participate in this study?

In order to participate in this study you must:

- Have a child currently in Years 5-8 at school
- Have reported bullying of your child to their school
- Be willing to take part in an interview about these experiences.

Bullying refers to behaviour where one person or a group deliberately and repeatedly set out to cause hurt, embarrassment or distress to another person. For this study, reports of bullying may include a range of interactions with schools, from conversations with a child's teacher to written complaints as part of a school's formal grievance procedure. Reports of bullying may have been made either to your child's current school or to a previous school.

I am interested to hear from parents who have been satisfied with the response they received from schools after reporting incidents of bullying as well as those who have had less satisfactory experiences.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and there will be no consequences to you if you decide not to participate. If you decide at any time to withdraw from the study you may do so without providing an explanation. You

may be assured that your child's school will not be informed at any stage of whether or not you have chosen to participate in the study. Your responses will remain anonymous and will not be linked to your child's school at any stage.

It is important for you to know that, due to limited resources, it may not be possible for me to interview every parent who indicates that they would like to participate in the study. In the event that more parents volunteer than I am able to interview, participants will be selected with a view to representing male and female students, students from government, independent and Catholic schools, each Year level represented in the study, and a variety of reporting experiences.

What does this study involve?

As a participant in this study, you will be invited to take part in an interview of 60-90 minutes duration, to be held at the University or another neutral location, at a time convenient to you. Due to ethical considerations I am not permitted to conduct the interview in the presence of your child. Before the interview you will be asked to read and sign a statement of informed consent. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and later it will be fully transcribed. If you wish, I will send you a copy of the interview transcript to review, and you may correct or remove any of the information you have provided.

The interview will involve discussion about how you became aware that your child had been bullied, your decision to report the bullying to the school, how you reported the bullying to the school, the response you received from the school, and any follow-up discussions you may have had with the school. With your permission, a follow-up telephone interview of approximately 30 minutes may also be conducted to clarify any questions arising from the initial interview.

Are there any possible benefits from participation in this study?

Your participation in this project will contribute to an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of parents whose children have been bullied. The findings of this research will potentially contribute to improved collaboration between schools and parents to respond to incidents of bullying. As a token of appreciation of your time, you will also receive a \$20 gift voucher to spend at a department store.

Are there any possible risks from participation in this study?

Information provided by you will be treated confidentially. However, if you agree to participate in this study, you must be aware that if information about criminal activity is disclosed to me, I may be required to report such information to the relevant authorities. It is important that you understand that the interview will focus on your experience of reporting bullying to your child's school, and not on the details of specific incidents of bullying or individuals who may be perpetrators of bullying. As a participant in this study, you will be asked to refrain from identifying by name any alleged perpetrators of bullying. The content of these interviews may be sensitive and potentially upsetting to you. During the interview you may decline to answer any or all questions or ask that the interview cease at any time without explanation or consequence. If you find any part of the interview distressing you will be provided with support via referral to the Lifeline 24 hour free counselling service on 131 114.

What will happen to the information when this study is over?

The results of this research will form the basis of my PhD thesis and may also be presented as conference papers and journal articles. Your anonymity will be protected to the fullest possible extent. Your name and other identifying

information will not be used in any publication arising from this research. All research information will be stored in locked filing cabinets and password protected computer files at the University of Tasmania, and will be securely destroyed five years after publication of the data.

How will I receive feedback?

If you would like, a brief summary of the research findings will be sent to you by your choice of email or post once the study has been completed.

What if I have questions about this research?

If you have any questions relating to this study, please feel free to contact me by email: Karen.Herne@utas.edu.au or phone: 03 6226 2552. You are also welcome to contact my supervisors to discuss any aspect of the research:

Dr Jeanne Allen
Phone: 6226 1972
E: Jeanne.Allen@utas.edu.au

Dr Janet Dymont
Phone: 6226 2573
E: Janet.Dymont@utas.edu.au

This study has been approved by the Tasmanian Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or complaints about the conduct of this study you should contact the Executive Officer of the HREC (Tasmania) Network on (03) 6226 7479 or email: human.ethics@utas.edu.au. The Executive Officer is the person nominated to receive complaints from research participants. You will need to quote HREC project number: H0012883.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this study.

Yours sincerely,

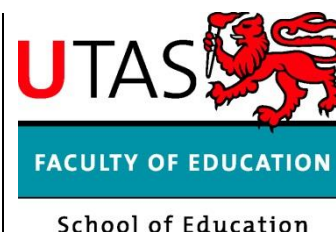
Karen Herne

If you wish to participate in this study, please complete the enclosed response form and return it in the stamped self-addressed envelope provided or email to Karen.Herne@utas.edu.au.

This information sheet is for you to keep.

Appendix C: Parent Consent Form

Parents' experiences of reporting bullying to schools



1. I have read and understood the 'Information Sheet' for this research project.
2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
3. I understand that the study involves participation in an interview lasting 60-90 minutes and, with my permission, one follow-up telephone interview lasting 30 minutes. With my permission, these interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed. I understand that the data will be kept anonymous.
4. I understand that if I wish, I may review a copy of the interview transcript, and that I may correct or remove any information I have provided.
5. I understand that any information I supply to the researcher will not be linked to individual schools.
6. I agree that during the interview I will not identify by name any alleged perpetrators of bullying.
7. I understand that information provided by me to the researcher will be treated confidentially and will be used only for the purposes of research.
8. I understand that if information about criminal activity is disclosed during the interview, the researcher may be obliged to report such information to the relevant authorities.
9. I understand that talking about my experiences may be uncomfortable, and I have been provided with information about a freely available counselling service should I wish to further discuss any issues raised. I understand that I may discontinue the interview at any time.

10. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for at least five years before being destroyed.
11. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
12. I agree that research data gathered from me for the study may be published provided that I cannot be identified as a participant.
13. I agree to participate in this study and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect.

Participant's name: _____

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Statement by Investigator

I have explained the project and the implication of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

☐

(If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked).

The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided, and participants have had the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this study.

☐

Name of Investigator: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Public Notice

Parents' experiences of reporting bullying to schools



UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

Parents of children in Years 5–8

The University of Tasmania is seeking participants in the Hobart region for a study of parents' experiences of reporting bullying to schools.

If your child is currently in Years 5–8 at school and you have, at some time, reported bullying of your child to a school, you may be able to help us by taking part in an interview about these experiences.

Your stories will help us to understand how schools can best work with parents when responding to incidents of bullying.

We are interested to hear from parents who have been satisfied with responses received from schools, as well as those who have had less satisfactory experiences.

Information provided as part of this study will be treated confidentially.

If you would like to participate in this study, or to find out more, please contact Ms Karen Herne by email Karen.Herne@utas.edu.au or phone ~

★ 3503 CRICOS Provider Code: 00586B

Appendix E: Parent Interview Guide

Opening statement for interviews:

Thank you very much for agreeing to be part of this study. What I would like to do is hear about your experiences of reporting bullying of your child to a school or schools.

The focus of this study is on parents and their experiences. In this study I am not aiming to collect information about specific incidents of bullying or individuals who may be perpetrators of bullying. Also, I am talking to parents from a range of schools and so I am not focussing on any schools in particular.

I am especially interested in what it was like for you finding out that your child was being bullied, how you decided to report the bullying to the school, what that process was like for you and how you found the responses you received from the school.

*I am really interested to hear **your** story, and so rather than ask you a set list of questions, what I would like to do in this interview is to invite you to tell me about your experiences in whatever way you feel comfortable.*

Prompts:

Can you tell me about when you first realised that your child was being bullied?

- How did you find out that they were being bullied?
- Did your child talk to you about the bullying?
- Did your child ask you to do anything about the bullying?

What did you do when you found out about the bullying?

- What sorts of things did you say to your child about what was happening?
- What did you tell them they should do?

What made you decide that you would tell the school about the bullying?

- Was there a particular thing that prompted you to contact the school?

What did you expect that the school would do after you had reported the bullying?

Did you know if the school had a particular process for reporting bullying?

Who did you contact first at the school?

Can you tell me what happened after that?

- What, if any, action did the school take?
- Did the school get back to you to tell you what they had done?
- Do you know if the parents of the child/ children who were doing the bullying were told?

Can you tell me a bit about what it was like for you, when you were talking to school staff about the bullying?

What was the last contact you had with the school about your child having been bullied?

Are things any different for your child at school now?

Are there any specific incidents that come to mind – to show how things are better or not?

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about to your experiences of reporting bullying to schools?

What advice would you give to other parents who are aware that their child has been bullied at school?